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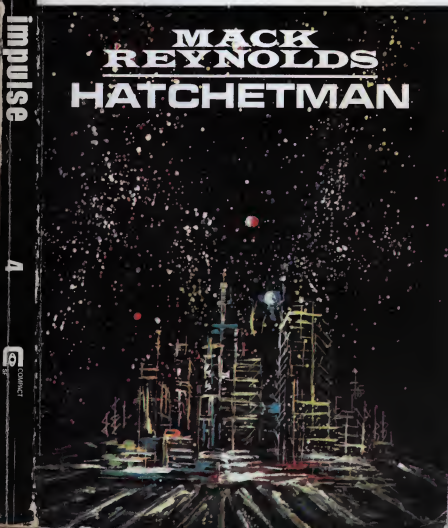
## MACK REYNOLDS HATCHETMAN

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SF



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Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

by Harry Harrison

We were discussing the future of science fiction the other evening over brandy and cigars, the only civilized way to have such a discussion. (Though it was a small measure of brandy and a midget cigar, courtesy of the ruinous British taxes that penalize simple pleasures, but that is a different matter and best left to another time.) My companion was another sf writer so the topic was of more than abstract interest.

The new book that you have just purchased was written at least one year ago—probably two years ago, or more. The books that will come out a year from now have already been sold to the various publishers, or the manuscripts are hopefully making the rounds. The book that an author begins writing today will not see print until the winter of 1967-1968 in the very earliest. We were talking about the books that will appear on the spring list for 1968, and this is not as abstract as it sounds because we must start writing those books now. What will those books be like?

Unhappily, a good number of them will be old hat: reprints that editors, desperate for material, have dredged up from the splintery barrel bottom. Others will be rehashes of old themes. We were not talking about these which, like the Conservatives, will be always with us. We wanted to know what the new themes would be, the new areas that would be explored, the new schools of writing that might be seen. Since these books are as yet unwritten, I can predict without restriction. And, interesting thought, perhaps the predictions will be read by other writers, who will start thinking along the discussed lines—and write the books to fulfill the predictions.

NEW THEMES. This is a hard one because the ground has been dug over for years and is getting quite barren. (Besides, if I had a really *new* theme I would write a book about it, not give it away free.) We can hope that we will

see less of the Old Standbys, the psi novel, and the first landing on Mars, and the man who single-handedly saves the galaxy, and all the rest. We might, hopefully, see more adult themes. You will remember Master Space Explorer Ainson in *THE DARK LIGHT YEARS* who said that "Civilization is the distance man has placed between himself and his excreta." I feel that sf is best today when it is the greatest distance possible from its pulp magazine antecedents. While pretending to deal with real atomic reactors, real spaceships, real exploding suns, science fiction has peopled its stage with cardboard characters, pinned together at the joints, moved by thick cords, and totally invisible to all except a head-on view. This must change. If we can ever man our three-dimensional rockets with three-dimensional people we will have created literature.

What are these more adult themes—or just new themes? Some of them will be found in the 'softer' sciences—psychology, sociology, demography—rather than the classic 'hard' science sources of physics and chemistry. Writers in search of ideas should read all the technical journals they can find. In magazines like the *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN* there is a story in every article. Adult stories are about adults—a truism that might safely be done up on samplers and hung from every sf writer's wall. Adults carry on a variety of activities; they pick their noses, eructate, shave, eat, make love, pare corns and so forth. (Though not necessarily in that order.) They are irresponsible and surly and make mistakes, then make up small lies to conceal the mistakes. I am not plugging for an ashcan school of sf writing—though that is not a bad idea. The field will hold at least one ashcan-novel: quick someone, write it. I am just trying to make a comparison, and if you still do not know what I am talking about I'll name names. Think about ship captains. Think about the priest who captained the river boat in Graham Greene's *A BURNT-OUT CASE*. Greene's captain—a very minor character—is real, adult and believable. He is a better captain than all the hordes of spaceship captains who have guided their ships through the pages of science fiction.

EDITORIAL—continued on page 101.

# HATCHETMAN

by Mack Reynolds

Billy Antrim was riding hard. He had little sure knowledge of just how far behind him the sheriff's men might be—nor, for that matter, of how many they were.

He was keeping off the roads as much as he could, but that was becoming increasingly difficult since the area was far from sparsely populated now that he was approaching the city. His only chance, he figured, was to get to the city and go to ground.

He twisted and turned over the open fields, trying to keep to such cover as was offered by clumps of trees, by gullies, by lines of fence. And from time to time he cast a glance over his shoulder.

Not that Billy was particularly afraid. Scared, he would have called it. In his profession, you couldn't afford that emotion. A pistolero in action is cool—he either keeps that way, under stress, or he doesn't long survive. And thus far Billy Antrim had survived—in spades.

He rode hard and he rode deviously, and from time to time unconsciously he loosened the gun wedged into his belt. For in spite of manufacturers of quick-draw holsters to the contrary, the fastest draw is from the belt.

He could see the lights of the city ahead. In fact, he had been able to see them for some time. He became more optimistic. His favourite slogan was, *one chance in a million*, but he felt he had better than that now. At least so far as getting to the city was concerned. Beyond that . . .

It was then that he picked up the sound behind him. His ears were good, with the sensitiveness of the organs of youth, since Billy Antrim was nineteen years of age. There was no doubt in his mind. At this time of night, others would have been sticking to the roads, not riding madly over fields, crossing streams, thundering up and down hillocks.

He darted a look back. Spotted them. Shot a calculating

glance toward the city ahead. He would never make it. They were coming up fast. How many of them, he still didn't know.

"One chance in a million," Billy muttered. He sneered his own brand of amusement.

He was a slight youth, just past the pimply age, with a sallow face, dirty blond hair and baby-blue eyes—the traditional eyes of the man killer. His teeth were buckteeth enough usually to show through his lips. In spite of youth, he could never have been called good-looking. He was five-foot eight, weighed slightly less than one-fifty, and he moved with the grace of a girl—no, not a girl; with the grace of a panther on the hunt.

There was an outcropping of rocks immediately before him, out of place in this vicinity of gentle fields. He quickly swung around it and came to a halt. His hope was that their eyes were as keen as his own and that they had already spotted him and knew that they were closing in. The other man's reflexes weren't usually as fast as those of Billy Antrim's and now that was all he had left to depend upon.

When they came slewing around the rock outcropping, slowed a bit in view of the fact that they couldn't be sure exactly where he had gone beyond, Billy was standing there, at comfortable ease, the short-barrelled gun in his hand and already half aimed.

There were two of them. Only two.

He had flicked the selector switch to full blast, automatic. Now he gently squeezed the trigger and the windshield of the pursuing floater shattered into slivers and dust and the vehicle, suddenly driverless, banked to the left, crashing into the rock pile in a grinding, collapsing, shrieking complaint of agonized machinery, framework and glass.

He stood for a moment, the gun still at the ready, though there was small chance that any life could have survived his attack. He watched expressionlessly, poker-faced, feeling nothing whatsoever in the way of regret or compassion. They had played the game of pursuit and lost. What was there to regret, so far as he was concerned? He had won, in his one chance in a million gamble.

He tucked the gun back into his belt and scrambled to the top of the rocks, marvelling as he went that there should be comparatively open countryside this near to Greater Washington. It was deliberate, undoubtedly. Evidently the largest city on Earth had some desperate need of a bit of countryside surrounding it. What amounted to a national park, where there were air, trees, and even an occasional stream. A memory of what the world had been in yesteryear.

From the top he surveyed back over the route he had just covered. So far as he could see, there were no further pursuers. They had evidently sent no more than two men, confident that with radar, sensi-screens and their other ultra-modern police equipment and armament, one man posed no problems. There was the faintest of smiles on his usually poker-face.

He returned to his floater, lifted it and headed toward the city. He would have to plan carefully now. Undoubtedly his two pursuers had been in continual communications with their headquarters. Suddenly their reports would have been cut off. Headquarters would undoubtedly send out more men, but, what was more pressing, would call ahead for the city's police to be on the watch for him.

Billy Antrim's problems were far from over.

Ronald Bronston said to Irene, "What's roiling the Old Man?"

She paused long enough from her switches, her order-box, her buttons and phones to say snappishly, "How would I know? He never tells me what's going on around here. I'm supposed to be clairvoyant, telepathic, and omniscient to boot. I tell you, there's a lot of jetsam around this office."

Ronny grinned at her. "Sid Jakes called and said Ross wanted to see me immediately."

Irene Kasansky was as important a cog in the wheels of Section G, of the Bureau of Investigation, of the Department of Justice, of the Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs, of United Planets, as was Ross Metaxa himself. Or so, at least, everybody said, including the Old Man

when he was slightly in his cups. She loved every soul in the small department and the affection was reciprocated with interest—though no one would have dreamed of admitting it, on either side.

She said now, "Well, don't stand there. If his high mucky-muck summoned you, scamper." She added, "Tell him he can have up to fifteen minutes with you. Then he's got to see Lee Chang about the Han rebellion."

"Got it," Ronny told her, making for the inner door.

She looked after him for a split second, deciding that of all the top field agents in Section G, Ronny Bronston least looked the part, which was possibly to be one of his most valuable assets. Irene loved them all, these spearhead men of the conquest of space, but there was a particular something about Ronny Bronston. She snorted inwardly—first thing she knew she'd be letting him catch onto the fact, and then where would things be?

Ronny went through the entry and turned left to the door inconspicuously lettered, ROSS METAXA, COMMISSIONER, SECTION G.

Section G, Ronny thought, all over again. *What an innocuous name for Department of Trouble-shooting, Department of Cloak and Dagger, Department of Secret Treachery. Department devoted,* he reminded himself bitterly, *to the principle that the end justifies the means.* Ronny had yet to forget he had been raised in an atmosphere of high ethic and ideals.

Ronny knocked and the door slid open.

Ross Metaxa, bleary eyed as always, looked up, as always affecting the acid surliness which fooled everybody—sometimes even himself.

He pushed some reports away from that part of his desk immediately before him and fished the brown bottle from a drawer as he said, "Sit down, Ronny. Drink?"

"Not from that bottle," Ronny said.

"How's the wound?" Metaxa growled, pouring himself a slug. "Doctor got you off booze?"

"I'm okay now. I've got *myself* off that Denebian tequila of yours," Ronny said, sinking into a chair. "I know when I'm well off. I'll stick to kerosene."



"Very funny," Metaxa grumbled, knocking the liquor back over his tonsils, impervious to the other's shudder. He put the top back on the bottle, began to return it to the drawer, changed his mind and shoved it to one side of the desk. "What do you know about Palermo?" he said.

Ronny cast his eyes slightly upward and spoke as though remembering a lesson. "One of the far out planets, in more ways than space. Colonized by Italians . . ."

"Sicilians," Metaxa grunted.

". . . only recently joining the UP. The government and socio-economic system seem to be unique."

His superior grunted sour amusement. "That's a gentle way of putting it," he said. "The government is by *Maffeo*, a very old Sicilian institution which they seem to export along with their emigrants. Its origins are lost in antiquity but seem to go as far back as the slave rebellions of the Romans."

"Romans?"

"What's wrong with your history, Ronny?" the other said gruffly. "The Roman Empire. Controlled . . ."

"Oh, yeah. I remember."

The other grunted. "You can look it up in the archives later. At any rate, it seems that the planet Palermo was originally settled by peasant types, evidently largely interested in fleeing this very institution. They found their planet, way beyond what were then the reaches of UP, and paid through the nose to have themselves and their scanty belongings hauled out. Space Freightways handled the transportation. One of their usual gyp arrangements."

Metaxa came to a sudden halt in his delivery and said into his order-box, "Irene, what ever happened to that investigation on Space Freightways? I told you I wanted an immediate report."

Ronny Bronston couldn't make out her answer, but he caught the snap in her voice. He grinned inwardly.

"All right, all right," Metaxa snapped back. "But tell that loafer to get a move on." He grunted and turned back to Ronny.

"At any rate, the colonists of Palermo managed to foul up their whole project through sheer lack of sophistica-

tion. Planted in their number were a handful of the very Maffeo they thought they were getting away from. In less than two generations, the outfit was in control."

"In what way?" Ronny said.

"In the most brutal way," Metaxa told him sourly. "You can look up details later. What interests us is that at this time the planet is stagnating under what amounts to a modern form of robber baron feudalism. A handful of bully-boys on the top, a terrified peasantry working their lives away on the bottom."

"They're members of UP?" Ronny said. "Why'd we let them in? As long as they were outside, we could have dealt with them. A few agents could have drifted in and pulled some . . ."

Metaxa was nodding. "Because we were stupid, and they were smart, instinctively smart. Luigi Agrigento, current head of the Maffeo, saw the handwriting on the wall when nearby planets began also to be colonized. He petitioned to join UP and was admitted after the usual mild routine. He understood perfectly well that given membership, Articles One and Two of the United Planets Charter protected him from outside interference.

"And if he'd left it at that, he probably would have gotten away indefinitely with his usurpation of power on Palermo. But that wasn't the Maffeo way, and never has been. Last year, one of his victims, named Giorgio Schiavoni, managed to stow away on an Avalon trader which had stopped off at Palermo, and after various difficulties wrangled his way here to Earth, where he presented himself at the Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs and told a rather bloodcurdling tale of suppression on his home planet. He claimed to represent a majority of the planet's population and requested aid. The Palermo Embassy, of course, put up a howl, invoking Article One."

Ronny said harshly, "Some of our member planets *need* interfering with."

Ross Metaxa glowered at him, took up his bottle and poured himself another jolt. "Bronston, if you ever express that opinion publicly, you're out. You're out so fast, and so hard, you'll never get a place in UP again, not to speak

of this department. Don't ever forget, Ronald Bronston, that the job of Section G is to advance member planets in their socio-economic systems, their political systems, on certain occasions in their religious systems—but that if we let that fact out, we're sunk. Needless to say, Palermo is one of the worlds that would prefer to stay just as it is, threat from aliens or no threat. At least, that's the way Luigi Agrigento and his Maffeo see it. The majority of the peasantry would have other views."

"And that's where this Giorgio Schiavoni comes in, eh?"

Metaxa's heavy face worked. "That's where he used to come in. Schiavoni did the unforgivable, given the Maffeo philosophy. He talked. Yesterday, he was shot down leaving the apartment we had assigned him over in the Pittsburg area."

Ronny stared at him. "Shot down! You mean a man was *assassinated* right here on Earth?"

"Exactly. Luigi Agrigento's hand was evidently long enough to stretch all the way from Palermo. It gives you some idea of his methods."

Ronny was flabbergasted.

Metaxa wrapped it up. "Your job is the only angle we've come up with, so far. It's to track down and either, preferably, capture or if necessary liquidate the professional killer who did the job."

"He *escaped*?"

Metaxa said grimly. "Thus far. I'm rushed now, Ronny. Sid Jakes will give you more details, physical description and so forth." His face went hard. "But I'll finish up with this: Giorgio Schiavoni's death will be atoned for. He threw himself on the mercy of United Planets, in a patriot's cause, and his protection was left in the hands of this department. There hasn't been a political assassination on Earth in the memory of anyone living and we allowed ourselves to be careless. Very well, but Schiavoni will be vindicated, that I promise."

Ronny came to his feet. "I'll see Jakes," he said simply.

The office door of Ross Metaxa's right-hand man was, as always, slightly ajar.

When Ronny knocked, Sid's voice yelled out happily, "Come on in! It's always open!"

Ronny braced himself and entered. He was still not quite used to the Sid Jakes personality.

The supervisor was as informal in appearance as his boss, if not more so. Ronny sometimes wondered how either of them ever got past the Octagon guards when coming to work in the morning. Jakes invariably looked more like a man in his oldest sports clothes taking off on a weekend fishing, rather than a high ranking official in the staid Octagon.

"Ronny," he exclaimed, bouncing up from his chair and speeding around the corner of his desk. "Thought you were in the hospital!"

He wrapped his arms around the other and chortled happily. "I told you, when you're dodging bullets, you ought to zig instead of zagging."

Ronny had to laugh at him. "And vice versa?" he said.

"As the occasion calls. Sit down, sit down. I read the reports on your assignment on Goshen. Pulled off a neat trick there."

"Yeah," Ronny grunted. "And wound up with a hole in my side."

Sid Jakes zipped around to the other side of his desk again and into his chair. "And got a three-month vacation," he pointed out. "You field men get all the breaks."

"Yeah," Ronny said.

Sid Jakes turned serious for a brief moment, the longest known period for him. He said, "I see you're on this Billy Antrim job."

"Billy Antrim?"

"This assassin from Palermo."

Ronny said, "The Old Man didn't give me his name. You were to fill in the details."

The Section G supervisor popped his feet up onto the desk. "Okay. Here they come. The lad you're chasing is named Billy Antrim. Not William, Billy. Our dossier on him isn't complete as yet. And maybe it'll never be completed, if you're able to pull off your assignment quickly."

Ronny said, "I don't see how he could have remained uncaught even this long."

"Because he's a cunning snake," Sid told him, grinning as though that made the whole thing happier. "He's a lad who's never done anything in his adult life except use a gun. If you can call him an adult."

Ronny looked at him quizzically.

Sid Jakes took up a report from a desk almost as littered as that of Ross Metaxa. He puckered his lips. "He's not twenty yet, according to this. At any rate, here's the run-down. Our Billy wasn't born on Palermo; he came there as a child with his mother. She was evidently some sort of entertainer, probably on a rather low level. To cut things short, one of Luigi Agrigento's bully-boys evidently gave her a hard time one night. Cuffed her around a bit, for playing too hard to get. And our Billy, who was eleven or twelve at the time, knifed the man to death." Sid chortled. "Mind you, this chap was one of Luigi's bodyguards. And a twelve-year-old finished him off. Neat trick, eh?"

"Very neat," Ronny said dryly.

Sid Jakes chuckled. "Now you'd think that would get friend Luigi all riled up, but not at all. He evidently thought it was the funniest thing that had happened since his grandmother fell down the well. He had Ruth Antrim, the mother, kicked off the planet—for her own protection, since they've got vendetta traditions on Palermo that evidently apply even to women—but took over the care of the boy himself."

"I can see what's coming," Ronny said.

"Right. The boy was a crack shot before he was fifteen. Which was just as well, since he killed his second man at that age. Some relative of his first victim who evidently decided vengeance was in order even though Billy was under Agrigento's protection. He had evidently also learned to throw a knife and . . ."

"Throw a knife?" Ronny said blankly.

"That's right. Evidently they've got some skills preserved on Palermo that have died off elsewhere," Sid said happily. "But you might remember that knife routine. And Billy's not on the large side, even smaller than you, but evidently

he can use his knife doing close-in work too." Sid Jakes grinned. "You beginning to love him more and more?"

"More and more," Ronny said.

"It seems that Luigi was pleased as Punch with his protégé and began to use him as a professional pistolero. Government on Palermo, it appears, doesn't call for courts of law, judges, juries, jails and that sort of jetsam." Sid beamed. "Not at all. The Maffeo takes care of all those little things. At any rate, our charming Billy became quite adept at his trade. A real pro. So much so that when Luigi got in a tizzy about Giorgio Schiavoni escaping from Palermo, and above all sounding off to the Commissariat of Interplanetary Affairs, he sent Billy Antrim to set things right."

Ronny said, "How did he ever expect Antrim to make his getaway?"

Sid Jakes took his heels from the desk and leaned forward, beaming. He pointed a finger at Ronny. "Now that's the real beauty of the thing. Our Luigi knew damn well that young Billy wouldn't ever succeed in making a getaway and hence made no effort to provide one."

Ronny frowned. "You mean Antrim knew he'd get caught, but pulled the job anyway?"

Sid shook his head. "Not if our dope is correct. Luigi Agrigento figured on throwing Billy to the wolves. He let the boy *believe* there was a getaway all arranged. But there simply wasn't."

The field man didn't get it. "But I thought Antrim was his favourite protégé. He wouldn't . . ."

Sid Jakes chuckled. "I keep telling you about these Maffeo lads. They've very uncouth, as the term goes. Luigi isn't the type to let friendship, or affection, interfere with business and there was one advantage in sending Billy to do the job. Billy isn't a citizen of Palermo, having been born on Delos. When blame is being scattered around, Agrigento will have some claim to innocence."

Ronny whistled softly. "Well, what happened here on Earth?"

"It was done very professionally indeed. A classical assassination of the very old school, such as you see in the

historical Tri-D shows. Giorgio Schiavoni, was located, set up, and fingered. And Billy shot him very neatly indeed, like the old pro he is—at the age of nineteen.

"But it was then that the wheels began to come off for Billy Antrim. The getaway floater evidently simply wasn't there. Neither were any of his supposed colleagues. He was left stranded with the local sheriff's men coming in fast."

"Sheriff?"

"It's an old police term, going back to antiquity. They still use it in some areas. The head of the local commissariat of police. At any rate, Billy shot it out with them, killing one man and sending two to the medicos. He stole a floater and took off, apparently without plan."

"And he's remained at large all this time, on *Earth*?" Ronny said unbelievably.

Sid Jakes held up a hand, grinning. "Wait. You haven't heard it all. The alarm went out, of course, and he was cornered again not three hours later." Jakes snorted. "This time he killed two men and wounded two bystanders, both women. Then he stole one of the police floaters and was off again. He ditched it later and at gun point forced three people out of a private floater and took off in it. But there was a pattern by now. They could see he was heading for Greater Washington, and set up road blocks."

By this time, Ronny was staring. The story was incredible.

"They flushed him twice more," Jakes said. "The last time, just last night. I don't think even the Old Man knows about this. I haven't taken it in to him yet. Two of the local floater patrol caught him in their bips and started in pursuit. Mind you, this was a standard police floater, with all equipment. Evidently Billy realized he couldn't outrun them and lifted his vehicle to about a ten-foot level and took out over the fields, with them after him. But it wasn't Billy's style to wait until they caught up and finished him off. No, sir. He zipped around a corner, got out of his floater and waited. You can imagine their surprise when they came tearing around that corner and there was young Billy, waiting. By the way, he carries a gun that is at least

as powerful as one of our Model H's. When we found the two patrolmen they were like tomato paste."

Ronny wound it up for the other. "So he made it to Greater Washington, and whatever his destination was."

Sid Jakes shook his head, as though pleased with the whole affair. "He has no destination. He's probably just trying to disappear into the city. Billy is basically a city boy, and it's the best place on Earth for him to hide. Don't think he'll head for the Palermo Embassy. He knows better. Billy Antrim hasn't survived this long by being stupid. He *knew*. He knew the moment that getaway floater didn't materialize that he'd been betrayed."

Sid Jakes leaned back in his chair, beaming at his subordinate. "So that's your phase of the job. Get Billy Antrim. I don't need to tell you what his continued freedom means to the department. If political assassinations can be successfully pulled off right here on Earth, heads are going to roll in Section G, starting with Ross Metaxa himself."

Ronny came thoughtfully to his feet. "How come we're not putting more men on it?"

Sid grinned at him. "Our prestige is low enough as it is. If we assigned a dozen men to capture this callow boy, how would it look? Nope. There's only one of him, so there'll be only one Section G agent sent to get him. You'll have, of course, the support of all the police apparatus you'll need. Just call. But there'll be only one Section G agent."

He stood too and stuck out a hand for a shake. "It'll be a neat trick, if you pull it off, Ronny. And Ross'll have your scalp if you don't."

Ronny said acidly, "From what you say about this Billy Antrim, Ross'll never have a chance at my scalp if I foul up. Billy'll already have it."

Billy Antrim was on the run under one of the most difficult situations conceivable.

He had no credit card acceptable on Earth.

Looking back at it now, he could see that Big Luigi had



deliberately arranged that. The obvious thing would have been to have equipped Billy Antrim with several valid credit cards, just in case. Without one he could breathe and he could get water to drink, but practically all else was closed to him.

This was his first visit to Earth and his first contact with this type of exchange, but animal instinct told him that the simple stealing of a credit card wasn't the answer. At least, not a permanent answer. In an economy using this exchange medium, somewhere along the line would be ultra-efficient computers, checking and double-checking each transaction no matter how small. A stolen credit card might be used once or twice, but then whatever police powers were available to the accounting computers would be after the thief.

He slept the first night, his stomach empty, standing in the nearest equivalent he could find in the city of Greater Washington to a darkened alley. It was darkened through his own efforts, and he didn't like that bit of it, either. He had no way of knowing how soon the light failure would be taken care of by the city maintenance department. He slept standing, to the extent he slept at all, his hand never further than inches from the weapon in his belt, the gun which he knew how to use so well.

A maintenance squad floater came through at dawn and Billy, catlike, awoke fully from his drowse. He shrugged his shoulders in the nearest thing he had time for in way of stretching cramped muscles, gave his clothes a rapid brush, stuck his hands in his pockets and stepped out briskly, whistling a currently popular Palermo dance tune.

The two men of the squad looked at him blankly.

Billy grinned his toothy grin and said, "Sure is pretty this time of morning, ay? I just can't help comin' out and walkin' around."

One of the two men looked up at the lightening sky, his face still empty. Colour was there. New colour in the grey-black of night. He had seen dawn many thousands of times. Perhaps the first thousand had even awakened some feeling in him. Now, he wished he was in bed. The other one didn't bother to look up. He grunted sarcasm.

Billy, his hands still in his pockets, turned and went on his way, still whistling.

The first of the two looked after him for a moment. "Crazy young jerk," he muttered. "Doesn't know when he's well off. He'll freeze his bottom off in this weather with no more but that jacket on."

The other growled, "What the devil was he doing in this alley with the light off and all?"

The other grunted contempt of the question. "What d'ya think he was doing?"

Billy Antrim was going to have to eat. Already his head felt somewhat light as a result of having not eaten for . . . how long? There'd been two oranges and half a box of cookies in that floater he'd gloamed from those three scared-to-death yokes a couple of days ago. He sneered amusement. They'd thought he was on some juvenile romp and tried to give him their watches and jewellery. He needed three more watches like he needed a knife in the kidney.

But he had to have food.

The gods to whom Billy Antrim prayed when in his personal fox holes came through. The streets were still largely deserted, but immediately ahead of him a citizen lurched from a doorway and started up the avenue.

Billy's eyes darted around him. The streets were otherwise clear.

He called out, "Ay! Mac! you dropped somethun!"

The other swayed to a halt, reversed his engines and looked back at the hail. It could only have been for him. His lids were half lowered over cloudy eyes.

"Whuz the matter?" he slurred.

Billy came nearer. "I saw you drop somethun, just when you was coming out of that there house there."

The other fumbled hands over pockets, absently. "Oh," he said. Then, finally, "What?"

"I don't know what," Billy said plaintively. "I just saw you drop somethun, just when you were coming out of the lobby like."

The half-drunken, half asleep one grunted a sigh and

started back for the door from which he had emerged. Billy followed him into the hall.

The drunk peered around. "I don't see noth—"

Billy clipped him over the back of the right ear expertly with the butt of the gun.

He couldn't safely leave him here. He couldn't even take the time to frisk him here. He grabbed the man by the collar of his jacket and hauled him slowly toward the back recesses of the hall. Given luck, he wouldn't be found until other inhabitants of the building issued forth later in the day. Especially if Billy did some more in the way of darkening lights.

He sent his hands briskly over the other's clothing. He was interested in nothing beyond the credit card, and found it without undue effort.

He stood and looked down at his victim. One of his tutors, Piero Caravaggio, of the Agrigento staff, had once told him that if you kicked an unconscious man in the side of the head a couple of times, he wasn't able to remember your description upon regaining consciousness. It sounded unlikely to Billy, but when you had only one chance in a million, you couldn't afford to ignore any opportunity to better your odds. He kicked twice.

Before the romp which had culminated in the elimination of Giorgio Schiavoni, Billy had spent a few days with some of the boys sampling the fleshpots of Greater Washington. Thus it was that he was acquainted with the location of those areas of town which catered to the nightowl set, or the workers, theatrical and otherwise, which in any big city must be fed and ministered to at all hours. He summoned a copter-cab at the next corner, dialled the coordinates he wanted and took it to within several blocks of his destination. When the cab stopped, he hesitated. He could do one of two things: press his newly acquired credit card to the cab's payment screen, which would automatically open the door for him, or break the lock and escape. Which would, of course, immediately set the powers that be after him.

No, the safest thing was to use the card. The drunk he had rolled, with any luck at all, would still be unconscious.

Would certainly not as yet have noticed the loss of his card. In fact, given the Antrim luck, the yoke probably would get himself home and into bed to sleep it all off, before discovering his loss. Even then, he would probably list it as lost, rather than stolen—given the Antrim luck.

Billy pressed his card to the cab's screen and dismounted from the vehicle, which took off into the traffic just beginning to materialize.

He went into a monstrosly large cafeteria type restaurant which catered to actors, musicians and the like. He ate once and hugely for the sake of his stomach as it was. Then he went back and past the array of foods once again, this time selecting such items as fruit, bread rolls, sandwiches and cake, which he could carry with him, and returned with these items to his table, tucked away in a largely unoccupied cove of the dining room. There he wrapped them up in an abandoned theatrical publication he had found.

With his package under his arm, he went to the men's room and did all that was possible to erase the ravages of the past three days. He wasn't going to be able to be conspicuous on the streets. He had no illusions; every police authority on the planet Earth was on the lookout for Billy Antrim. Happily, his beard was so light as to be almost meaningless, which was a godsend, since he had no shaving facilities.

By the time he issued from the restaurant, it was fully day and he merged into the foot traffic on the pedestrian level of the street.

He had got no more than a block before whining sirens ululated behind him. He came to a shocked halt. This was *too* quick. The drunk should still be unconscious, still groggy enough not to realize his credit card had been lifted. But even if he had recovered, the fuzz-yokes shouldn't be on Billy *yet*.

An auto-department store had opened side doors for the entry of its few workers. Billy Antrim entered briskly, strode at the same speed as the others, went to the lifters and took one to the third floor. He went over to the windows and looked back the way he had come.

There were three floaters, obviously police floaters, pulled up before the resto-caféteria from which he had emerged only moments before, and disgorging hurrying men, some in uniform. His lips were white over his prominent teeth in a wolf-grin.

Had he known it, Billy Antrim was at that moment looking at the back of his eventual Nemesis, the man who would send him to his death.

Ronny Bronston strode quickly into the interior of the resto-caféteria, flanked by Lieutenant Rogozhsky of the Baltimore section of Greater Washington's police. Rogozhsky was highly sceptical.

Ronny said sharply, "Have your men go through the place. Thoroughly. Then take on the neighbourhood. If he's not here, we've probably missed him, but possibly not. He probably needs clothes, a razor, that sort of thing. He might be in a nearby store."

Rogozhsky said sceptically, "You don't even know this is him. For that matter, you don't even know he's in the city."

Ronny Bronston flicked open a wallet container. The badge inside said simply, "*Section G, Bureau of Investigation*," and it gleamed with a silver sheen.

Ronny said flatly, "I am giving orders, Lieutenant, not debating opinions."

Lieutenant Rogozhsky flushed, came to the salute and muttered, "Yes, sir." He turned to his men and took out some of his feelings on them.

Ronny said, "We're police. Twenty minutes ago somebody here ate a fantastically large meal, then, on the same credit card, bought a great deal of picnic type food. Did you see him—or her?"

The manager was shaking his head. "This place's completely automated, Citizen . . . whoever you are. We aren't one of these swanky joints with waiters and all that jetsam. We don't specially notice nobody that comes in here. We only got four people on a shift. How'd you expect . . ."

Ronny said urgently, "A young fellow. Maybe twenty years old. He probably sat off by himself. He was possibly

a little shabby in appearance. Even dirty. He probably finally left with a package under his arm—the extra food he'd bought. He probably spent quite a time in the wash room."

"Hey," the other exclaimed. "You're right. A young fella. He sat over there. Over in that corner. He was kind of rumpled up, like he maybe slept in his clothes. He went into the washroom and stayed there quite a time. Then when he went out he had this paper bundle under his arm."

"How long ago?" Ronny snapped.

"Hell, maybe five minutes before you come in!"

"Lieutenant!" Ronny yelled. "It's him! Get your men on the streets. Get on your communicator for more floaters. He left no more than five minutes ago!"

Lieutenant Rogozhsky was a competent officer, no matter what his opinion might be in regard to Bureau of Investigation bigwigs interfering with his department's affairs. He got on the ball.

Ronny Bronston took a small communicator of his own from an inner pocket. It looked innocuously like a woman's vanity case. He sat down at a table, propped it before him and clicked it on.

He snapped to whoever was at the other end. "It's Antrim. We're no more than five minutes behind him. He's got himself a credit card somewhere. We'll check back on that later. I suspected he'd be desperately hungry and that the first time he ate it would be a gargantuan meal, followed by something he could take along. I had the computers watching for such an order. It came through. The credit card he's got is 25X-3342-K852-Division GW. Alert all computers to check every purchase on that card. Alert at least a thousand police floaters, all over the city. We're in the Baltimore area, but he might already have taken a pneumatic somewhere else. They're to be on instant alert for when he uses that card the next time."

Billy Antrim had intuition as well as cunning. He ditched the credit card in the first waste chute he passed and left the department store by a back entry.

He strode, seemingly at ease, hands in pockets again, and slouching like a high school youngster. But nonchalant though his pace seemed, he made the best time he could without looking as though he was in a hurry. Several police floaters, dashing about in high state of efficient confusion, passed him by, going this way, going that.

With his left hand he loosened the weapon in his belt. It was getting warm. Much too warm. They were bringing in every fuzz-yoke in the city.

He stopped at a traffic regulator and spoke to the occupant of a floater who was impatiently waiting a go-ahead.

Billy stuck his head in the window, grinned ruefully and said, "Ay, citizen, you goin' over toward the river?"

The citizen in question scowled at him. "What of it?"

"Well, I'll tell you. You'll probably just laugh but . . ."

The other grunted, darted a look at the regulator. He was still held up. It'd take more than some youngster's minor tragedy, whatever it was, to make him laugh this time of day, especially since he hadn't even had time for coffee.

Billy was saying plaintively, ". . . so the fellas thought it'd be a big joke to swipe my junior I.D. credit card. And when the party was over, here I am, and I can't even take a pneumatic."

"Okay, okay, climb in. I'm not going to cancel my dial, though. I'll take you as close as we get to wherever you're going. Then you'll have to manage however you can."

"Gosh, thanks a million, Citizen."

Billy climbed in, slouched down in the seat, teenage style, and watched city, traffic and pedestrians go by. The fuzz-yoke was getting thicker by the minute.

The floater swung up to a higher level for speed and Billy noted the passing of the town below with satisfaction. They'd have Baltimore behind them in moments.

His benefactor remained glumly silent, which was all right so far as Billy Antrim was concerned, until they reached the vicinity of the Potomac.

He said then, "You said the river, boy. Where do you want me to drop you?"

Billy Antrim said softly, "You aren't dropping me, Mac. I'm dropping you."

The other blurted, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Billy brought the gun from his belt with an easy motion and held it on the other's waist. "This is a romp, Mac. Put the floater on manual, and let's get down."

"Why, you damn . . ." The other reached for him, in fury.

With a fluid speed, Billy slapped him hard against the side of the head with the gun barrel. Then he slugged him again, more deliberately, but more effectively.

Billy sneered. Once a yoke, always a yoke. It was like Big Luigi had always said. You never got over it. You're born a yoke and you die one.

He frowned at the thought. Who was he to be appreciating Luigi Agrigento- Luigi had treated him as though he was a yoke himself. Even as he was turning the floater controls to manual, Billy Antrim had the first twinge of doubt about the philosophy in which he had been raised. Maybe this citizen he had just slugged was only a yoke, but Billy wondered if he would have sent what amounted to a son to his sure death to gain only a minor advantage, a Maffeo revenge.

Fortunately, his victim was an even smaller man than was Billy Antrim. By considerable effort he was able to boost him over the front seat into the back and down on the floor of the vehicle. Billy then gave him another tap on the temple—with the butt of the gun this time.

He brought the vehicle to a near-stop and considered his situation. He was without a credit card again. He had one possibility that came to him immediately. He could lift this yoke's card, kill him rather than just leaving him unconscious, get out of the floater after dialling it to, say Mexico City, and then have the use of the card for possibly as much as twenty-four hours before the floater and its body were discovered. The auto drive would take it clear through to Mexico, and tucked down on the floor like this, the yoke would probably never be spotted.

He didn't know why he decided against the step. Perhaps, for one thing, he wasn't sure he'd have the use of the card for that length of time. He couldn't figure out how the fuzz-yoke had got onto him so quickly with that



last credit card he'd stolen. There must be some angle he wasn't aware of.

He snickered self-deprecation and dialled the floater toward the Norfolk section of the city. It was about as far as he could get from where they'd flushed him in the Baltimore area, and besides, it was one of the oldest and least respectable sections of town—where the interplanetary spacemen hung out, and those that were this millennium's nearest equivalent to the slum elements of an earlier age. His clothes would attract less attention here.

When he put down, in as quiet a vicinity as he could find, he took up his bundle of food, slipped his newly acquired credit card into his pocket, slugged his benefactor once more for luck, and dialled the floater's controls to Richmond. After it had disappeared with its unconscious passenger, Billy faded into the neighbourhood.

Ronny Bronston was looking on the harassed side, and Sid Jakes' grin of derision didn't make him feel any the happier.

Ronny said, "He's got a new credit card. One that he got from an electrical engineer whose apartment is in the Baltimore area. A fellow named Ernest Gutenberg."

Sid flicked a switch. "What did you say the number was?"

"78Y-7634-L991 and, of course, Division GW."

"How do you know it was Antrim?"

"Who else? We were minutes behind him. Somehow he managed to get into Gutenberg's floater. The man's wife says that he was heading for his office, near the Capitol Building Museum. When he was found, on the floor of the back seat, his credit card was gone and the floater had come to a halt in the centre of the Richmond area. By the way, Billy's score, here on Earth, has gone up to seven. Gutenberg died from concussion. Seven dead, half a dozen wounded in varying degree."

Sid Jakes nodded, his face grim for once. "The little rat is a one man task force." He bounced up from his chair, walked unhappily about his desk, sat down again. "Maybe we ought to put more men on it," he grouched.

"No!" Ronny blurted.

Sid looked at him and chuckled. "Getting to be a matter of pride, eh? Where do you think he is?"

"Probably in the Norfolk area. He hasn't used his new card yet. That youngster's like a cornered fox. He hasn't done anything wrong yet . . ." Ronny Bronston took in the amused expression on his superior's face and growled. "I mean he hasn't done anything wrong from his viewpoint. With his luck, he should have become a gambler instead of a professional gun for hire."

"Why Norfolk?" Jakes said.

"It's the farthest point from Baltimore still in Greater Washington. And, besides, it's a section where he can stay the most inconspicuous. His clothes must be getting on the crumby side by now, but there are others with crumby clothes in Norfolk."

Sid said happily, "I'm glad it's your problem, instead of mine. Where do you think he's hiding himself?"

Ronny didn't answer. He said, instead, "Look, can you have Irene go to work on alerting every museum, every art gallery, every library in Greater Washington? Every place where entry is free and there are chairs, rest rooms and lots of people. Same for parks, zoos, that sort of thing. Alert all attendants at such places. Do we have a picture of him yet?"

"No," Jakes said. "Through our attaché in Palermo we've picked up all the dope on him we can, but no picture as yet. But we can have one of the artists do up a sketch based on his physical description. Buckteeth, light brown, almost blond hair, blue eyes."

"Okay," Ronny said wearily, coming to his feet. "I think I'll get over to the Norfolk area. If I had to disappear in this city, I think that's where I'd head."

Sid chuckled amusement. "From what we've seen of this Billy Antrim, he's probably one ahead of you. He figures that that's where you'd figure he'd be, so he's probably in some swank area such as Arlington, or maybe back in Baltimore."

"You're great for my morale," Ronny muttered. "How's the rest of the case going?"

Sid Jakes shook his head. "Stymied. Billy Antrim wasn't a citizen of Palermo. The Palermo Embassy denies they had anything to do with the shooting of Giorgio Schiavoni. Claim it must have been a personal matter between Antrim and Schiavoni. In fact, they hint there was bad blood between the two, when Schiavoni and Billy were both back on Palermo. What's more, they're hinting rather heavily that even in questioning them about the matter, Article One is being strained, if not broken."

"Oh, swell," Ronny said.

"Worse than you think," Sid grinned. "Ross is going driveling-happy. This is a real tough one. Most of the victims of our Section G shenanigans never know what hit them. They're not looking for our particular type of double-dealing. Palermo's another thing. The Maffeo lads suspect *everybody*, given cause or not. Our representatives on their planet are bugged, shadowed, have their mail read and their space cables scanned, automatically."

"So what's the answer?" Ronny said.

"We don't have any answer. Not so far," Sid said, as though pleased. "The way it looks to me, Luigi Agrigento and his Maffeo are going to live happily ever after, and Palermo is going to remain in the dark ages, whether or not the balance of United Planets continues to haul its way up by the bootstraps."

Ronny Bronston said, "I'm glad I'm only a bloodhound on this assignment. You and Ross can have the headaches."

Billy Antrim was in Norfolk, all right, but in one other respect he was one ahead of his unknown pursuer. He wasn't foolish enough to spend his time in museums, zoos, or even parks. His intuition as a killer animal on the run told him that such institutions would be on the watch.

Instead, he made his way to the nearest secondary school, slouched his way in in his now practised imitation of the teenager of all centuries, joining the crowd. At the first opportunity, he took up a pile of books which some negligent student had left unsupervised for the moment, and carried them along under his arm in like fashion to his neighbours.

He located the school library and stayed there as long as he thought practical, and then managed to find the students' projection rooms, where he spent the rest of the morning watching educational Tri-D tapes. It didn't take him long to locate those pertaining to historical matters involving wars of the past and such items of violence.

He discovered by chance that noon-time meals in the school's cafeteria were free and saved his paper wrapped reserves from the resto-caféteria of that early morning.

But sleep was now becoming the ultimate necessity. He hadn't truly slept for three days and even youth has its limits, especially when under the stress being carried by Billy Antrim.

However, he couldn't discover a hiding place in the school buildings where he could trust himself for even an hour, and he knew that if he took the chance, an hour would never do. Once down, he was going to be a log for at least eight hours, possibly more. He couldn't afford to let down his defences for that length of time, even if he had found a hole in which to hibernate.

The Antrim luck continued to hold when school let out. He took up his books and drifted along with the current of students, those who were pedestrian. He hated to be out in the light of day at all but at least he had protective colouring for a time. He had no idea of how good a description Earth authorities had of him. For all he knew, Luigi Agrigento might have even leaked them a photograph, his fingerprints and whatever else they might have wanted the better to hunt down Billy Antrim. His lips pulled further back in a wolf-like, humourless grin; Big Luigi wasn't going to be entirely happy until he got word that his former protégé was no more. There was a lot Billy knew about the workings of the Maffeo.

As his fellow students dropped off to the left and right, Billy Antrim was faced with the problem of new camouflage. He wasn't going to be able to walk the streets, certainly not after nightfall, with his armload of books and remain inconspicuous. He had to find shelter, and, above all, he had to find sleep.

He pulled up short before a Sauna-Turkish Bath.

If it was anything like the Moorish type bath which had come down in Sicily from the days when the Saracens had occupied that island, and later went on the planet Palermo . . .

He'd take the chance. He entered.

The place was, of course, highly automated. There was but one attendant and he, bored, was scanning a portable Tri-D set. He hardly looked up. "In there," he said.

The dressing room had individual lockers, of course. Right now, he was the only customer. Billy Antrim hesitated only momentarily before parting with his clothes, his food supply and, above all, his knife and gun. But there was nothing for it. He locked them up and slid the elastic which bore the key about his wrist.

There were lettered instructions about the room. He followed directions, spent a minimum time in the steam room, took one quick plunge in the pool, then sought out the massage rooms. They were separate cubicles. He entered one. There was no key, but the door evidently registered OCCUPIED when someone was inside.

He sneered at the instructions for making operative the electrical masseur and flung himself down on the massage table, asleep before his body had completely relaxed on the hard surface.

A voice said, "Hey, chum, you fell asleep. You figuring on stayin' all night?" There was a laugh, as though something hugely amusing had been said.

Ordinarily, Billy Antrim's awakening was instantaneous, as a professional killer's should be. But now his exhausted body resisted awakening. He muttered something, fretfully.

"Come on, come on, boy. I'm closing up."

Billy Antrim felt a less than gentle hand shaking him. He came instantly alert, staring at the other, his blue eyes ice.

The attendant he had seen earlier in the other office pulled back his hand quickly. He said, stubbornly, "It's closing."

Billy swung his legs around and to the floor.

"Awright," he muttered. "Gosh, I musta fell asleep."

The attendant left and Billy made his way back to the dressing rooms and reacquired his belongings. Nothing had been touched.

This was the crucial point, now. Before returning to the entry office, he loosened the gun beneath his jacket, but then assumed a puzzled and repentant expression.

He approached the desk with its payment screen against which to press a credit card.

"Ay, Mac," he said sorrowfully. "Guess what? I'm sorry, but it looks like I forgot my credit card."

"Oh, yeah?" The attendant looked at him truculently. "I shoulda noticed. Why, you probably ain't even got a adult card. Come on, boy. Get that junior I.D. out. You're not talking yourself out of paying up. I seen dead beats before."

Billy said doggedly, "I'm sorry, Mac, but like I told you. I musta left it home. I'll pay you tomorrow."

"I never even seen you before. I'm calling the police, sonny. Nobody's walking out on this business." He reached for a switch.

Billy Antrim had two alternatives. The butt of the gun was within inches of his right hand. But a new killing would bring down the fuzz-yokes, and they were already too close behind for comfort.

He said hurriedly, "Look. This here ring. It's a star sapphire. I'll let you keep it, until tomorrow. Then I'll come back and pay off."

The other's eyes narrowed in greed. "Okay, boy. I trust you. You know how it is."

"Yeah, sure," Billy said bitterly. "I know how it is." He turned and left.

His mother had given him the ring. Back when they had been flush once. He suspected it had been given to her by a male admirer, most likely a lover, but it was the only thing he still possessed to keep alive the memory of Ruth Antrim, the one person he had ever loved. Now it was gone.

What had happened to Ruth Antrim? After Big Luigi had shipped her off, Billy had never heard. She had probably written him, she would have written, but he sus-

pected Luigi Agrigento had confiscated any such mail. Luigi at the time was amusing himself by educating the boy in the traditions of the Maffeo, and in the use of the gun, the knife, the sap.

It was dark on the street. Warily, Billy Antrim trudged along, portraying the schoolboy who had dropped off at a theatre and was now making his way on home.

He had no time to be thinking of Ruth Antrim and Luigi Agrigento, but for the moment he couldn't keep them from his mind. For the past three days fingers of doubt had been touching sensitive spots in his mind. While still a member of the Maffeo machine of Palermo, it had been easy enough to rationalize his way of life. The things he did were by order of Big Luigi himself, weren't they? And Luigi Agrigento was the most important man on Palermo. It was as simple as that. What Big Luigi said was law.

But now, as a victim of the machine, rather than a cog in it, the injustice of the Maffeo way was more evident.

Billy Antrim sneered at himself, in sour self-deprecation. He was a rat on the run. Why not face reality? He was scum that the decent members of the race had to mop up. And then, contradictorily, he told himself in braggadocio that they'd have their work cut out in the mopping.

"One chance in a million," he muttered.

It was getting too late for a schoolboy to be out. He'd be the more conspicuous by hanging onto the guise. He dropped the books into a waste disposal chute, straightened up and walked with a swagger, and as though he had already had two or three drinks before going out on the town seriously.

With luck, he decided, he might be able to crash a party. A party that would provide food and drink, though drink he could do without. Even at the most secure of times, a little alcohol went far with Billy Antrim. He could afford no blurred edges now.

He didn't find the party, but he did as well.

A middle-aged, slightly overweight, overly-blonde, overly-dressed madonna of the cocktail lounges allowed him to pick her up. In fact, she couldn't have been more obviously approachable had she dropped her handkerchief.

She reminded him of someone, but he couldn't finger the resemblance.

In their early preliminaries, she giggled archly and said, "I must be robbing the cradle. Why, you can't . . ."

Billy was looking his most adult. "I know I look young. Always have. I guess when I get up into my fifties, I'll be glad. Now it's a pain in the neck. Anyhow, I'm twenty-five. And I'll bet you're not any older."

She giggled again. "Well, to tell you the truth . . ."

"Call me Jimmy," he said.

"All right. I'm Betty Ann. To tell you the truth, Jimmy, I'm twenty-five too."

She was a good twenty years senior to that, Billy decided cynically.

"How about a drink?"

"We don't have to go any further than in there, Jimmy," she laughed, indicating the nearest auto-bar. "You know, I'm glad we met. I think we're going to have fun. Wasn't it a coincidence?"

It turned out that he had left his credit card at home.

She laughed at that, too. At the edge of forty-three, Betty Ann had picked up the bills before. She didn't particularly mind any more. Her need was for young men and to indulge it she had found long since that the best bet was to haunt the poorer sections of the city—and to be quick and willing to press her own credit card to the payment screen.

He spent the night at her apartment. Not that it did her much good. In spite of his youth, and what she had hoped would prove his prowess as a lover, it was as a deep sleeper that he turned out to be a veritable phenomenon. Betty Ann was disgusted.

In the morning she fed him breakfast, sitting across the breakfast nook from him, taking no more than coffee for herself.

In the light of day, without cosmetics, she was fully her age. Perhaps even a bit older in appearance than reality, for the past ten years had been hard ones, filled as they were with desperate attempt to halt the flight of youth in



parties, in alcohol, in hard pursuit of Eros. It was all Billy could do to bring his eyes to her face, even as he wolfed a prodigious breakfast of six eggs, a full quart of milk, six or eight slices of bacon and as many of toast, with butter and marmalade.

He had placed who she reminded him of, now that he saw here in morning's unkindly light. Ruth Antrim. His mother after playing the late hour shows; tired and dishevelled and caring nothing—except for him, of course.

Betty Ann watched him wearily as he ate. "What did you plan on doing today?" she said finally. There was no girlish giggle in her voice now, only the weariness of a middle-aged woman who wouldn't, who couldn't, quite give up as yet.

He looked up at her, quickly looked down again. "I don't know," he said. Then, slowly, "You're a lot of fun."

"No, I'm not," she said.

"Sure you are. Why don't we just hang around here today? It's my day off. We'll hang around and have a lot of laughs."

"And tonight you'd spend here again, eh?"

"Well, sure."

"I'm afraid not, Billy."

His eyes were blue ice. "The name's Jimmy."

"Kids named Jimmy don't carry guns with the front sight filed away and the forepart of the trigger guard, so as not to get in the way of a quick draw."

His voice was as level and cold as his eyes. "You seem to know a lot about guns, lady."

She shrugged, wearily. "I read a lot and watch the Tri-D shows a lot. A single woman my age has got lots of time to watch the shows. I woke earlier than you and watched this morning for awhile. The drawing they show of you isn't very good, but good enough, Billy Antrim."

He looked at her, poker-faced, but his mind was racing.

She shook her head. "If you had to be worried about me telling them, I could have done it hours ago. All I had to do was pick up the phone while you were still asleep, after I had checked your clothes and found the gun. I suppose I should have . . ."

"I don't like that kinda talk, Betty Ann."

". . . But I didn't. I don't know why. You'd better go now, though."

He looked at her for a long moment. He couldn't figure out why she hadn't called the police, either. She certainly wasn't in love with him; he wasn't the type to inspire love in a woman. Besides, she hadn't had time to fall in love with him. And be in love with a seven-time killer on the lam? Not even a woman as desperate as Betty Ann.

His best bet would be to add her to his list. She would have a better description of him than was evidently available thus far. She'd said the drawing they were showing over the air wasn't so good. She'd be able to improve it for them.

She chose that moment to reach for the coffee pot, wearily. He had seen Ruth Antrim in that exact pose a thousand times.

A thousand times back in those days when there had been only the two of them. And when all the world had been only the two of them. When no one else had counted. Tired she might have been, exhausted from twice the number of shows a performer should have been expected to give—but never so tired that she couldn't discuss the dream with him.

The dream of their settling down somewhere and of Ruth finding some other manner of supporting them—it had never been quite clear what that might be, since she had known nothing else but show business. And he would go to school, and soon, very soon, such would be his efforts, he would be able to find a grand position of his own, and then Ruth Antrim would need work no longer. And then, indeed, the goal would have been reached. A home of their own, with Ruth to keep it and with Billy faring forth each morning to his labours, and she there to greet him at day's end.

He more or less knew it now for a boy's dream and that of a tired woman in her early middle years. Deep within, he knew it had lacked reality. That at best there had been no room in it for his own marriage and eventual children. There had been no room in it for anything or anyone.

except Ruth and Billy Antrim. But still it was a dream that came back to him.

Billy Antrim didn't have many dreams.

He shook his head and came to his feet.

"Goodbye, Billy," Betty Ann said after him.

Ronny Bronston was saying into his portable communicator, "It was him, all right. The description tallied. He's evidently got Gutenberg's credit card, but is too smart to use it unless it's an emergency. He went into a Sauna-Turkish Bath in Norfolk and spent nearly four hours there. Sleeping, of course. Then he told the attendant he'd forgotten his credit card and left a star sapphire ring as a pledge."

Sid Jakes interrupted him quickly: "You think he'll go back to redeem it?"

Ronny snorted. "Of course not. I think he's cunning enough *never* to go back to where he's been before. Besides, he'd be in the same position as before. The moment he used the credit card, to redeem his ring, we'd be onto him. At any rate, the Sauna-Turkish Bath attendant had second thoughts about the ring, wondering if it was stolen. It seemed too valuable to have been left in lieu of such a minor amount. He reported it, and the police relayed the story to me. They relay anything that involves somebody getting or trying to get something, or some service, without having a credit card."

"You don't seem to be making much progress," Jakes chuckled, as though that was amusing. "Ross is beginning to have second thoughts about assigning you to the job."

Ronny grunted. "At least I know I was right, before. He's in the Norfolk area. And now, with his face all over town, he'll be doubly hard put to hide himself. He'll show. Within twenty-four hours I wager he'll show. His luck can't hold forever."

However, it was holding thus far.

Billy Antrim had to stay out of the light, and that was exactly what he was doing. In the cheapest part of the

Norfolk section of Greater Washington, he was sitting, half sprawling, at a table in the darkest bar-cum-nightclub he could locate, the *Pleasure Palace*.

Had he dared, he would have put his face in his arms, as though in drunken sleep, but he was afraid that the one caustic faced usher who supervised the automated alleged amusement centre would have ordered him from the premises. As it was, he leaned his face on a cupped hand, so that the fingers could cover his prominent teeth, his chin and part of the nose, and pretended to watch the fairly spicy canned Tri-D show.

He had to do something, and fast. As it was, the only thing he was accomplishing was to keep a few jumps ahead of the authorities. He knew it was only a few jumps by the inordinate number of police floaters on the streets. It had been nip and tuck a few times. They obviously knew he was in the Norfolk area. He had to do better than this, or it was just a matter of time before he slipped and they would have him.

At the thought of it, he loosened the gun. He would at least go out with a bang. He twisted his mouth at the thought. He undoubtedly would, but what would be accomplished? What percentage was there in his being able to take two or three more of the fuzz-yokes with him—or even a hundred more?

The usher was eyeing him.

Billy had sat down at a table where there were a couple of glasses, one of them with an inch of dregs still in the bottom. He had pretended this glass was his own, but even had the usher been fooled on that—his eyes hadn't been on Billy when he'd entered—he had evidently gotten around to noticing that his new customer wasn't doing much in the way of drinking up and dialling anew.

He had to do something, or leave. If the usher got around to coming to the table, he might recognize the Antrim features, even in this light.

Billy got to his feet and stepped over to the next table, which was occupied by a single customer, obviously deep in his cups. He couldn't have been much more than in his early twenties himself, surly faced, soft in spite of his age,

a trickle of drink-induced saliva at the side of his mouth. He was sloppy drunk.

"Ay," Billy said, grinning, "ain't you Steve Osterman, met at a party last week?"

The other glowered up at him. "No, I ain't no Steve whatever. And we never met at no party."

Billy shook his head in wonder and slid into a chair at the other's table. "Well, we sure as hell met somewheres. I never forget a face."

The other grunted. "Name's Barry. Horace Barrymore. Ev'body calls me Barry."

Billy snapped his fingers. "That's it. Barry. Now I remember. It was a great party."

The other scowled at him. "You from Detroit too?"

"Sure. Of course. That's where the party was. What you doing in Greater Washington, Barry?"

The other squinted at him slyly. "Gotcha that time. I never been in Detroit. I'm from Miami-Havana, see? And I got you figured out, Buster."

Billy's hand dropped into his lap. "Oh, you have, eh?"

"Yeah. I know you, Buster." The other chuckled to himself and picked up his glass. It was empty.

From the side of his eyes, Billy Antrim could see the usher making his way in their direction.

The self-named Barry grinned. "Yep. You're a drink cadger. Thas what. You just kinda pretend you know a guy and get talkin' to him, hopin' he'll spring for a drink. Well, Buster, let me tell you somethin' . . ." He hesitated for a long moment, as though having dropped his trend of thought. "Let me tell you somethin'." He burped. "Let me tell you, you picked the right man, Buster. I'll buy you a drink. Fact, I'll buy you a whole flock of drinks."

Billy let air out of his lungs, silently.

The other punched the auto-controls. "Pseudo-whisky and wasser, eh? Man's drink. And where I'm goin' there's nothin' but men needed."

The drinks appeared and the usher sheered off and headed elsewhere.

Billy said, cautiously, hiding his face behind the glass. "You celebrating somethin', Barry?"

"Damn right. I'm killing two birds with one stone, see? Two birds." For a moment he seemed to have lost his trend again. But then he said, "Spending my credit, see? No good where I'm going. And same time, celebratin' leavin' this damn Earth."

Billy said, keeping the conversation going, "You a space-man?" He was wondering how best to approach his heaven-sent gift about ordering some food instead of more drink. The man might even have a hotel room he could be coaxed into sharing for the night.

"Spaceman!" the other sneered. "Do I look like a space rat? I'm a *colonist*. Par . . . part . . . participatin' in foundin' of a new worl'. Unnerstan'? Like the brochures said. Out into the glor . . . glorious far beyon'. Leave this stinkin' Earth behine. A man don't hava chance here. Never get anywherc. That right . . . whus your name? Have 'nother drink. I know you're nothin' but . . . spunger. But thas all right. Havanother drink."

"Make mine light ale, this time," Billy said softly. "Look Barry, you interest me, like. How you go around gettin' to be a colonist?" He ran his tongue over the bottom of his upper teeth.

The other grunted surly amusement, and rubbed thumb and forefinger together. "You inherit some ol' family art objects and convert 'em to credit. Thas how. Then you join up."

"Join up what?" Billy said softly. His blue eyes were only slits now.

The other was impatient at his stupidity. "Join up one of the companies, course. Put up your share. Join company. Pioneers. Out into glorious far beyon'. Start up new worl'. Plenty chances for everybody. Live glorious natural life of frontiersmen of old. Get rich, exploitin' new worl'."

Billy Antrim said the next very softly. "Teamed up with a lot of your friends, eh?"

"Frens, hell. None of my frens ever had 'nough credit to make colonist. I just bough into one of the new formin' companies. You gotta belong to a company, with lotta pull. Get permission to leave stinkin' ol' Earth. Gotta have pull ina high place. New Arizona Company. Hire a space-

ship from Space Freightways. Land on New Arizona. Stake out claims. Live glorious natural life. Chance for everybody getta head. Not like stinkin' Earth—everybody down on you, less you benta lots school an' all."

The man was drooling drunk, Billy realized. Drunk beyond the point of memory tomorrow. He said, urging in his voice, "So you don't know anybody else among the colonists, ay? When do you check in with them?"

Barry eyed him owlshly, and for a moment Billy Antrim was afraid the other was going to fall forward, passed out. But with a dull shake of the head, he evidently regained enough clarity to get out, "Big party tonight. Spend all last Earth credits. Tomorrow, ev' thing set. Take shuttle rocket, local spaceport, shuttle out New Albuquerque. Got alla tickets. Get aboard S/S *Ley*. An' we burn off for New Arizona. Burn off. Thas space talk for . . ."

A voice from behind him said, "Friend, your buddy here seems to have had enough. In fact, I should've noticed him earlier. How about getting him on home?"

Billy, keeping his face averted, said, "Yeah. Suppose you're right, Mac."

The usher said, "Here, I'll help you with him. Cheese, he's really got a load on."

"Hey," Barry protested feebly. "I ain't drunk. I been drunker'n this. Big blowout. Gotta celebrate."

"Sure, sure," Billy soothed him. "Come on, let's get on home."

"Hey, wait up just a minute, friend. Somebody trot out his credit card. You got a man-sized bill here."

Billy moistened his lips. "The drinks were on him."

"Yeah. Well, by the looks of your pal, he's passed out. How about that? Hey, haven't I seen you someplace before?"

Billy said quickly, "I'll take care of it." He fished his purloined credit card from his wallet and pressed it against the payment screen. "Come on, help me to a cab with him. I wouldn't want him to puke all over your floor."

"Cheese," the other said. "Let's get going."

Ronny Bronston took the message in the police floater

in which he was prowling the Norfolk waterfront entertainment area.

*Credit Card 78Y-7634-L991-Division GW has been utilized to pay a nightclub bill at the Pleasure Palace . . .*

Ronny snapped to his driver, "You know where the *Pleasure Palace* is?"

"We passed it not five minutes ago. There on . . ."

"Get there! Fast!"

While the floater spun, ignoring traffic, narrowly averting disaster three times in thirty seconds, Ronny grabbed the hand mike.

"He's on the run! *Pleasure Palace* nightclub, Norfolk Waterfront. All floaters zero in! Something important happened. He's had to use the credit card. Zero in!"

Billy Antrim was as near to being in a funk as Billy Antrim ever allowed himself to get. He could hear the whining of the sirens from afar, a multitude of sirens. It brought to mind a faintest memory of youth when he had still been with his mother and their way of life had involved planet jumping with the troupe with which she had performed. It had been a planet in the Aldeberan group, he couldn't remember exactly which one. He'd been too young, but the planetwide holiday had been celebrated in a fantastic blowing of whistles and sirens. Thousands and thousands of sirens. On business buildings, on official cars, on factories, on ships, seemingly everywhere. It had been ear piercing, nerve racking . . .

He tore his mind from such non-essentials. He was in the clutch now. It was no time to be thinking of Ruth Antrim, and childhood. He had to get out of here, but fast!

He had dialled the cab more or less at random. He hadn't the vaguest idea where this Horace Barrymore might be staying. Some hotel, undoubtedly, but which was a mystery.

A floater was screaming down the street at them. Billy dropped to the cab's floor, leaving his semi-conscious companion propped against the glass of the door, eyes bleary but open. A light flashed, lingered a moment on the other's face, then the police vehicle was past.



Billy Antrim muttered, "One chance in a million," and regained his seat.

Even as they sped, he went through the other's things. Ticket on the rocket shuttle to New Albuquerque. A small sheaf of papers identifying Horace Barrymore as a member of the New Arizona Company. A spaceport pass, signed by an official of the company and the first officer of the Spaceship *Ley*. And the credit card which would have made so much difference, had Billy been able to utilize it earlier to pay the bar bill at the *Pleasure Palace*.

But things were still looking up better than they had ever since the débâcle that had taken place on the shooting of Giorgio Schiavoni. If he could only get out of this immediate tight spot.

Another floater was screaming up the sub-freeway toward them, its lights blazing. Billy ducked to the floor again. It was past.

His lips, white, thinned back over his prominent teeth in his wolf grin. As long as the fuzz-yokes were heading in the direction of the *Pleasure Palace*, he was comparatively safe. But as soon as the usher there revealed that Billy had left in a cab with a companion who was dead drunk, then the fat would be in the fire. They'd know what they were looking for.

Suddenly inspiration came. He grabbed up a directory, thumbed through it. Then quickly redialled the cab.

The auto-motel was only a few hundred yards away. The cab pulled up. As usual, there was but one clerk.

Billy got out and said, "Ay, Mac, my buddy here took on too big a load. Gotta room?"

The clerk had seen drunks before. In his time he had seen literally thousands of drunks. Drunks no longer interested him in the slightest. "He got a credit card to register with?"

"Sure, here it is."

"You registering too?"

"Naw, just my buddy. Wait'll I dismiss this here cab." Billy manhandled Barry from the floater-cab, turned him over to the clerk to balance waveringly for the moment

necessary to press the Horace Barrymore credit card to the payment screen, then turned back.

Between them, they managed to usher, push, half carry the flopping drunk to a room. Billy let him drop to a bed. He grinned at the clerk.

"I'll see he gets into the bed, and all. How about lettin' me have a bottle of pseudo?"

The other looked at him. "Ain't you guys had enough liquor?"

Billy chuckled deprecation. "Ernie here has, but not me. I only had one or two. Besides, when he wakes up tomorrow, he's gonna need a couple quick ones to keep him from dying. That's the way he handles it. Hair of the dog."

The clerk shrugged. "Each man can go to hell in his own way, I always say. I'll get the pseudo."

Billy began taking off the drunken Horace Barrymore's shoes. His mind, behind his poker mask, was racing. He had to handle this exactly right. He couldn't afford any mistakes now. On the road outside he could hear the floaters screaming by.

It was one chance in a million. Whoever was in overall command would expect—Billy was gambling—for the quarry to put as much distance between himself and the *Pleasure Palace* as possible. Instead, Billy had gone into hiding less than half a mile from the alleged palace of pleasure.

The pseudo-whisky came, the clerk gave another listless look at the drunk sprawled on the bed, grunted and left.

Billy Antrim had already taken the vital papers of the other. Now he stared down at him.

The spaceship left tomorrow.

Once spaceborne, he would be outside the jurisdiction of Earth. The ship wasn't even scheduled to set down on a United Planets world. It was colonizing a new planet. Billy Antrim would be answerable only to whatever authorities the colonists would set up. And Billy was going to be an invaluable citizen, so far as such authority was concerned. A new world, a frontier world, could use citizens with Billy's qualifications.

He turned his right hand over so that it was palm up-

ward and gave it a flick. A double edged fighting knife slid into his grip.

He could put a sign on the door requesting that the room not be disturbed. He could leave a call with the auto-service to the same effect. It would be well into tomorrow afternoon before Horace Barrymore was discovered.

By that time Billy Antrim would be well on his way to the stars. And who knew what he would find out there? Perhaps the chance at a new life. A different life than the one Luigi Agtigento had decreed for him when he'd been a boy of eleven. A life not composed of gun and stiletto. A life with meaning, such as his mother and he had once dreamed of for him.

The thought went through his mind. Perhaps he might even meet Ruth Antrim out there, once again. It was only seven or eight years, after all. But then he sneered self-deprecation, even as he stepped toward the unconscious Barrymore, the knife blade gleaming. Seven years, but look what he had managed to become. Would Ruth Antrim want to see what he was today, or would he want her to?

There was a line slowly trailing into the huge passenger-freighter—reminiscent, somewhat, of Noah's animals trailing into the Ark. Indeed, most were filing along two by two. Billy Antrim was one of the few who were single. That was just as well, he told himself. Married couples were conservative, lacking aggressiveness, compared to a single man. Billy would be able to make his place in this New Arizona.

They gave you a shot here. A little bit further on, they asked some questions. Further on they checked your papers, and still later, you had to sign some things. Then you shuffled along again.

Toward the end, there were two burly ship's officers. Before Billy realized what they were about, they had touched him here, there, the places a man carries a gun. A quick frisk.

He started to protest, but the senior of the two grinned at him and whipped the gun from his belt.

"Sonny," he said, "in spite of all you've heard about

adventure in space, it's not like that at all. Sorry. Captain's orders. No weapons among the passengers so long as we're spaceborne. You'll get this oversized cannon back when you land." He looked at it and grunted. "Where'd you get this thing, anyway?"

"It usta belong to my old man," Billy said sourly. "He usta be a gun crank, like."

"He must have been," the other chuckled. "Hey, Bob, look at this. Front sight filed away, and all."

But his companion had taken on the next colonist in the line.

Billy shuffled on toward the ship. He had carried the last hurdle.

There had been some crucial moments during the past twelve hours, but he had cleared every obstacle. He had crossed Greater Washington in another cab, using Horace Barrymore's credit card. He had got through the press of people at the shuttle-spaceport, without exposure, hiding his face in a handkerchief and sneezing time after time, just as he'd passed the ticket gate. He had sat in the back of the shuttle rocket, hiding his head in his arm and pretending sleep every time someone had come near.

Once outside Greater Washington, he felt some relief. He assumed they had circulated the inadequate drawing of him throughout the globe. Most likely. He didn't know. But at least people weren't *expecting* to run into him out here.

His papers had been cleared without difficulty. He had, on the rocket shuttle, practised Horace Barrymore's shaky signature a few times. It wasn't difficult. A scribble.

It had carried him past, easily enough.

And now he was actually entering the ship.

At the entry level stood another ship's officer, sheaf of papers in hand.

"Name?"

"Horace Barrymore."

"Horace Barrymore. Here it is. Berth 33, Compartment Twelve. Down that way, son."

Billy Antrim went as indicated. He had no baggage, but on the other hand, neither did most of the others. The

baggage had been checked earlier. Billy, of course, had none to check. After they were spaceborne he would put up a big howl, to cover. He could claim that they'd lost his things. It shouldn't be difficult. He might even get some sort of reimbursement.

Compartment Twelve was but a hundred feet or so down the corridor along which he walked. The door was closed. He opened it and stepped in.

Billy Antrim scowled. It didn't look to be the type of compartment devoted to passengers. On the far side of the room was a desk at which was seated an easy-going looking young man, his face tired and his clothing rumpled and dirty—like Billy himself.

He looked up quizzically. "Hello, Billy," he said, his hand reaching for the automatic which lay on the desk.

Billy Antrim blurred into motion. He crouched, his right hand flicked and the knife was there magically. He threw the hand back for the cast.

Ronny Bronston's eyes blinked in surprised alarm—his fingers were still inches from the gun.

Then there was something in the wild blue eyes of Billy Antrim. He threw the knife—

His throw was not quite true. It missed Ronny Bronston's head by scant millimeters and broke its point in a clang on the steel bulkhead beyond.

The gun was trained on Billy's stomach.

The Section G agent took a deep breath, swallowed, then managed to say, "You missed, Billy. I didn't expect you to miss."

Billy Antrim sneered. "It's all luck," he said. "Everything's luck. I had one chance in a million, and didn't make it."

The gun was steady.

"Sit down over there, Billy. I set this whole thing up only minutes ago. I didn't expect you quite yet. But shortly there'll be some local agents of my department showing up. Then we'll get about our business."

Billy sat, his strained juvenile face still in sneer. "You ain't got a jug could hold me, yoke."

Ronny Bronston looked at him meditatively. Evidently

the other didn't know that there were no prisons for such at him on present-day Earth. Criminals of Billy Antrim's ilk were turned over to medical science for rehabilitation.

Ronny said, "It's been a long truck, Billy. I don't mind admitting you almost made it. You know what your big mistake was?"

"Yes."

"Oh?" Bronston raised eyebrows.

"I didn't slit that drunken bum's throat last night. I should've. But instead I just poured more liquor down his gullet. I thought he'd stay under long enough for me to make it. He musta woke up right after I left."

Ronny Bronston looked at him in puzzlement.

"It doesn't sound like a man with your background. Why couldn't you kill him? You'd already finished off eight others."

"Seven," Billy muttered.

"Eight. One of those two women bystanders you wounded in Scranton died in the hospital."

Billy winced.

"With a record like that," Bronston pursued, "you should have been capable of finishing Barrymore off to make sure your back trail was clean."

Billy said sourly, "What difference does it make? Maybe I was gettin' tired of all the killin'. Ever since I knew Big Luigi give it to me, I been thinking about it all. About my old lady, and how she always said I was gonna go to school and all. But after I knifed one of Big Luigi's goons he sent her off the planet, and I never seen her again."

For a long moment, Ronny Bronston looked at the other. Billy Antrim, defeated now and at bay, still looked like nothing so much as a defiant school youngster, caught in some misdemeanour and hauled before the principal. There was even somewhat of a wistful quality in the juvenile killer's face, as though of a child grown almost to adulthood who had been allowed down through the years to press his face against the windowpane and look in at the others, celebrating their Christmases and birthdays—but never allowed to enter and participate.

Ronny shook his head, as though to clear away a trend of thought he couldn't afford.

He said, "I'm afraid not. I've been looking further into your dossier, Billy. Section G has been checking you on every planet you've ever set down on. And we've been checking that of Luigi Agrigento, too."

Billy was scowling at him. "I don't know what you're talking about, ya stupid yoke. I know what happened to my old lady."

"That's not Luigi Agrigento's way. His henchman molested your mother and as a result you killed him. Somebody, given Maffeo outlook, had to pay. And since it was your mother who was the original . . ."

Billy Antrim was on his feet, shaking. "You *lie!*"

Bronston, his eyes wary, shook his head. "Sit down, Billy. You know better. I have no reason to lie."

Billy slumped back into the chair, his once poker face twitching. "You lie," he muttered.

Bronston shrugged, as though he couldn't care less. "Agrigento evidently turned her over to his goon's relatives. And they . . . I didn't understand this part of it. What does *capontina* mean?"

"No," Billy Antrim whispered, his head in his hands, his body swaying. "*No.*"

Bronston said, an element of contempt in his voice. "You fizzled out, in the real clutch, Billy. You should have finished off Barrymore. And just a few minutes ago. You missed me with that knife on purpose, didn't you?"

Billy Antrim didn't answer.

"You haven't got the guts to kill any more, Billy," Bronston told him.

Irene Kasansky looked up from her screens and order boxes, her switches and buttons, and said with as near to a smile as Irene Kasansky ever came to a smile, "Hello, Ronny. How'd you make out in New Albuquerque?"

Ronny said, exhaustion in his voice, "Not now, Irene. Is the Old Man available?"

Irene snorted and said, "Sid Jakes is with him. But it's

nothing more important than your report. Where've you been?"

Ronny didn't answer. He was too exhausted to go through this more than once. He pushed his way through the door to the back and headed for Ross Metaxa's office.

Sid Jakes was sitting in a heavy chair across from the commissioner, who sat behind his desk. They both looked up when Ronny entered without knocking.

He slumped into a chair.

"Ronny!" Sid chortled. "How come no reports? For awhile you had me worried. I was afraid our Billy-boy had done you in."

Ronny shook his head. "I haven't been in a bed for four days," he said.

Ross Metaxa reached down into his desk drawer and came out with his brown bottle. "Drink?"

"I guess so," Ronny muttered. "Even that stuff."

While Metaxa poured, Sid chuckled, "Well, I suppose the fact you're here winds up the Billy Antrim segment of our troubles with Palermo. Now we'll have to get to work on the basic problem of our Maffeo friends. And that's going to be a neat trick, if possible at all, what with Article One of the Charter."

Ross Metaxa handed the drink over to his field man and growled, "Did you have to finish him off, or were you able to capture him? He might turn evidence, in case we ever have anything to take into the interplanetary courts. But above all, it's good propaganda, the civilization bit. The fact that here on Earth we don't execute or even imprison criminals, not even murderers. We rehabilitate them and release them as valuable members of society. Gives a good example to rawer worlds."

Ronny shook his head. "Not exactly either. I've spent the last day and a half with Billy Antrim getting plastic surgery up in New Chicago."

"Plastic surgery!" Metaxa exclaimed, his moist eyes bugging.

Ronny knocked back the drink and shuddered. It was every bit as bad as he remembered it.



He said, "By the way, what ever happened to Ruth Antrim, Billy's mother?"

"What's that got to do with it? Have you gone completely crazy?" Ross was blurting.

Sid Jakes said, "We even traced that out. She's living on Goshen now. Married to some sort of mining engineer." He grinned. "I suspect you have another bomb to drop, Ronny."

"The Department of Dirty Tricks," Ronny muttered, unhappily. "You see. I had to goose Billy."

Ross Metaxa rasped, "Where's Antrim, damn it!"

Ronny Bronston looked at him. "On his way back to Palermo."

Even Jakes lost his poise at that one.

Ronny said softly, "He has a date with Luigi Agrigento."

Metaxa closed his eyes and talked as though to himself. "I can fire him. I can claim he went off his rocker. I know what he had in mind. He figured that one man murder mill will get Agrigento. But does the fool realize that if he doesn't and it comes out that the Bureau of Investigation had a hand in the attempted assassination of a Chief of State what it will mean? The member planets will drop out of UP like dandruff."

Ronny was shaking his head. He reached over, took the brown bottle and poured himself another. "Billy's familiar with Luigi's security. He'll be able to get through, especially with the plastic surgery. And remember, Billy is a citizen of Delos, not Palermo. The moment Luigi Agrigento dies by the hand of a citizen of another world, Article Two goes into effect. Palermo has been interfered with politically by another member planet of UP."

Ronny got to his feet, preparatory to leaving. His voice was dead. "Which will be an excellent excuse for the United Planets Space Force landing, and, uh, re-establishing order."

Sid Jakes, his face empty, said, "Antrim. You think he'll . . . ?" His voice dribbled off.

Ronny said flatly, "Get away? Not on Palermo. He's expendable. He was the tool Section G needed, and I used him." He grunted deprecation. "Remember when you told

me how the guts of my conscience were going to be strained the first time I got one of the jobs we're really here for? I didn't know what you were talking about then. I do now."

Ross Metaxa scowled down at his brown bottle, wordlessly.

Nor did Sid Jakes say anything further.

Ronny said, "And now I think I'll go home and get drunk a little, and tell myself that the end justifies the means—though there hasn't been a decent thinker in the history of man who could arrive at that conclusion."

It was in a far place from the office of Ross Metaxa in the Octagon.

A slight figure was inching its way along a building ledge, his back and arms pressed tight against the stonework. He had about four inches upon which to operate. It was a matter of twenty or thirty yards, but he had few doubts.

"One chance in a million," he muttered. You didn't have much better odds than that when your goal was one of the most highly protected Chiefs of State in United Planets.

However, he had his own gods and now he was praying to them, and they weren't going to turn him down.

They didn't.

He made it to the window, brought the gun from his belt and rested it on the window sill.

He said softly, "Big Luigi."

The heavy man behind the desk stiffened, startled, but didn't turn. For the moment he was frozen.

The voice came ever so softly, "You wouldn't remember the face, Luigi, but it's me, Billy Antrim. You remember. Billy, the kid you sent for Giorgi, down on Earth. I just wanted you to know, Luigi."

The heavy-set man's hands flew—one to a button, one to a desk drawer.

Billy Antrim pressed the trigger, in an affectionate way.

And the guards stormed through the door, weapons in hand. Far too late for Luigi, but with ample time for Billy. For once again it was a matter of no getaway arranged for pistolero Billy Antrim.

— MACK REYNOLDS

# GEORGE

by Chris Boyce

"George, they're back."

"Umm."

"They're back, George. Wake up. This is serious."

"Oh aye."

"Stop sleeping and listen to me. I've just heard it on the radio. Hundreds of them. All over the place. They're in London, George."

"Tut, tut."

"Wake up. I'm talking to you."

So I gather. Honeysweet.

"It's not just a couple of them this time. Like in January. They're all over the world the man said. He says that the Americans have the Army out, and the Air Force as well. And the Prime Minister is going to make an announcement on the television at four this afternoon. It's terrible. People are being killed in swarms. George, they're back!"

"Who?"

"The dinosaurs."

"Lovely."

"For God's sake will you get up off of the sofa and pay attention. I am your wife, you know."

Could I but forget. Dovewillow.

"There's an international crisis in full swing and all you can do is take up your customary firm position: flat on your back, with your head buried in the sand."

A strain on the neck and lungs. Moonflower.

"George, you don't have to go out tonight, love, do you? I'm terribly frightened. Those terrible things, and London's only thirty miles away. Stay home."

"Must guard the petrol pumps."

"The petrol pumps! What about me? I'll have to sit in here with those things wandering around in the darkness."

What kind of man are you anyway? For the last six months you've been on permanent night duty. Anyone else would have stood up for themselves, but not you. You're only fit to fill other folks' cars with petrol. Haven't even got one of your own. O, God, what I have to live with. I know why you won't stay all right. I know. Fear. You need the company of those greasy little runts in the garage. They'll keep you safe from those monstrosities, but me? O no. It's just too bad about me! Tonight I'll have to lie alone and shivering in my bed, with no one to comfort me."

Should make a nice change for you. Jasminepetal.

"Mmm. Disgraceful."

"Disgraceful? Criminal is the word. Criminal. If you even thought of the children occasionally. It's almost as if they had no father at all."

Plenty of 'uncles' though. Sugarlamb.

"For their sakes you should not go out tonight. It is your duty to . . . What was that? Can you hear that? Bombs."

"Thunder."

"Bombs, George. They're bombing them. Listen . . . It's just like the war again. But it's too loud to be London. Must be nearer. Woking, maybe. I can't hear any planes, George."

Mortars. Cuddlekitten.

"George!"

"Thunder."

"I'm going to phone up the school and have Danny and Florence sent home. If they have no father worth speaking of I at least will protect them."

"Indubitably."

"You could take a few lessons from Barrie Grew. There's what I'd call a man. Accountant. Car. Athlete. And charming."

"And smokes French fags."

"Yes, how did you know?"

Fag packet in WC this fine morning. Sunbloom.

"In character."

"You're very smart. You'll change that attitude soon enough if this dinosaur business gets out of hand. Then you'll wonder what hit you all right, because I'll take the

kids and clear right out of here. Jennie and Martha will be more than glad to put us up."

"Amesbury?"

"And what's wrong with Amesbury? If those things came near we could hide on Salisbury Plain!"

Seek sanctuary in Stonehenge. Passionfruit.

"I'm going to phone. You can start peeling potatoes for the children's lunch."

"Bye."

There she goes klit klit klit down the tenement stairs. Never worry, George. The sun sets but to rise again. Imagine small murder sequence. She is in mid-sentence when speech is cut short by garrotte. Mr. Grew, this court finds you guilty of the murder of Mrs. Sally Knowes Herbert. Must arise. No. Let her do the spuds for a change. What's all this dinosaur stuff about? Switch on pretty pink and white transistor for gen. Deep sexy voice. Estimated number one hundred and fifty thousand in British Isles alone, and still growing. Military dealing with the situation. Do not panic. Stay indoors. BA-BAM BA-BAM BA-BAM BA-BA-BAM.

Yeeek. Sonic booms, but so low. Must be a squadron of fighters, probably Lightnings. Ummm. Situation must really be desperate after all. Shellfire and rockets now, the sounds drawing nearer. Door flies aside as panic demented wife enters. Plus kids.

"What in Heaven's name was that?"

"Fighters. Lightnings, I think."

"Thunderbirds, dad."

"They're Yankee planes, Danny."

"I know, but I saw them, doing about mach 1.2 I'd say. Perhaps the Saurians are Soviets."

Smart lad. Sonnyswine.

"Daddy, sure you won't let them dinar saws eat your own sweet little Flor?"

"Of course not. You're far too delicious for them. I'm going to eat you myself. Yumm."

"MOMMI, MOMMI, Daddi's going to eat me. Helphelp help."

"Don't you ever again say a thing like that to this child.

You know very well how sensitive she is. There-there, Mommi's lovely little candypuff . . ."

"Sensitive. That tiny head has so much goo in it that if you pulled the left earlobe you'd flush the syrupy brain right down the spinal column and out her—"

"George Herbert! You-say-that-in-front-of-these-youngsters-and-we-are FINISHED."

"We were all let away early today, dad. Everyone is taking these lugubrious lizards a shade too serious. Do you agree?"

"Did you peel the potatoes, George?"

"No to you both."

"Well, I'm going out to buy some 'instant potatoes'. I've more than enough to do besides peeling."

"The radio says that we've to stay indoors, Sally."

"That is typical of you. Typical. Don't think for yourself. Just do what the BBC advises. Well, if you think those beasts scare me, think again."

Thirty feet high, clam jaws, sabre teeth. Loverose.

"Mommi, don't leave me. Daddi will eat your own sweet little Flor."

"Daddi won't eat his little strawberrybun. Will you, George?"

"Yeecegh!"

"Don't make disgusting noises, George. Make some paltry effort to control . . ."

"LOOK EVERYBODY."

"Where's Danny?"

"THE STATION. Just coming under the railway bridge, mom. It's one of them ; see it?"

". . . sweet, merciful Jesus, guide and protect us. George. Oh, look at it, just look at that . . . that . . . oh, mommi, mommi, oh. What is that terrible object?"

That dinosaur. Snugglechild.

"Why are you boarding up the windows, dad? It makes the place frightfully dull inside."

"They can see through glass."

"Uncle Barrie says he doesn't believe in burying himself beneath a pile of wood."

"He lives in the sewers."

"I know and he says that we're all fools living up here. Suicidal, he says."

"So is living with dysentery and cholera, Danny."

"But there are no Dragons down there. Only people."

"Mmm."

"Why didn't we go to Amesbury, mom?"

"Because by the time your father appreciated the seriousness of the situation, travel was impossible."

"I don't like living here. It's draughty all the time."

"And your father doesn't seem to realize that his children are hungry all the time. If we had to live off the rubbish he brings in we'd starve to death within a fortnight. I just do not know what we would do without Barrie Grew. At least he is a regular source of supplies, and he isn't even family."

"I bring in rabbits, mom."

"You hear that George Herbert? Even your son realizes his superiority over you, and he's only fourteen."

Ripe for patricide. Boypig.

"Even your five-year-old daughter despises you. Doddling your time away with a pile of filthy scrap while we suffer. If I was only a man . . ."

You do have some of the characteristics. Summersmile.

"Where did they come from, dad?"

"Why ask your father? He is the most thoroughly ignorant creature on two legs. He can't understand the simple logic of safety in numbers. The safety in buildings made of ferro-concrete. Instead he seeks to live in this deserted heap. Out in the middle of nowhere. Miles from anyone. Barrie's has to make a journey of nearly eight miles each way when he comes."

But you make it worth his time. Happyglow.

"Did they come up out of big fissures in the earth's crust like the man on the radio said, or out of the sea. That's what Uncle Barrie told mom and me."

"Mom and I, Danny, not 'me'."

"No, mom. It's 'me' because—"

"I, boy. 'I I I I I'. The collapse of England does not signify the collapse of English. Understand?"

"Yes, mom, but—"

"NO BUTS!"

A soft quiet. Only the murmur mumble of wind at the door.

"The cities are swarming with Dragons, Sally. Animals go where there is the most food. There is none out here except ourselves, and if we keep hidden—"

"Keep hidden. You all over. Don't take any chances in case you get hurt, little boy."

"Well, actually, I'm working on a—"

"Work would kill you."

"What makes them so tough, dad? How do they stand up to all those bombs and shells and armour piercing bullets?"

Skin like mine. Ratchild.

"They're not invulnerable, Danny. The Yanks sent their entire West Coast up in nuclear mushrooms. Killed thousands of Dragons. Millions of people."

"Uncle Barrie says they have special laminate tissue on top of their normal hide."

"Umph. That's obvious to a blind man."

"But why did they suddenly just appear like that? Was it deliberate?"

"What makes you think that it was 'deliberate'?"

"Well, remember they suddenly appeared, a few of them, back at the beginning of the year . . ."

"Yes, George, remember ; you took such fright that you actually decided to get a job."

"And you look upon those ones as a sort of reconnaissance team, or something?"

"Could be, dad."

"HMMPH. Encouraging the boy to dream his life away like yourself. You'd be better modelling yourself on Flor than your father, Danny."

Charity, sweet charity overfloweth. Gloryheart.

"I'll go down into the village after dark and bring back some extra bedding. It'll be cold tonight."

"Please bring a toy for me. A dolli. Flor wants a dolli."

"Daddi will bring back a lovely present. Big black dog,



to bite off your pretty head and chew it into glue. That way you might be useful."

"Mommi! He's being cheeky to your applecrust."

"I'm going to kick her teeth in, Sally. Tell her how painful it'll be!"

"MOMMOMII!!"

"Get out of here and don't come near us until you've got enough blankets and food to see us through the next few days."

"After I've taught that infant Dracula to respect her father!"

"Don't take one step nearer."

Small shining hatchet in her hand. Ready much for action.

"Give that thing to me, Sally. Come on, give."

"I'll split you open. He showed me how."

"Who?"

"Who do you think?"

"By God. It's bad enough, you and him. But if I find him getting in the way of me disciplining my daughter—"

"YOUR daughter? hah hah."

Cold ointment forming in stomach.

Hatchet swings as you stagger. Gash along shoulder. Blood.

"Now clear out and bring back that stuff. And be snappy."

"Uncle Barrie little Flor's real daddi. So there."

A sweet but cruel truth. Bitchbrat.

Out in the fresh spring morning. Cold, crisp air. Stumbling along. Five-gallon drum of super grade petrol strapped onto back. Harnessed around shoulders is converted pressure insecticide spraying equipment linked with the drum, adapted, and special nozzle attachment fitted with what was once gold plated gas fag lighter.

And she had said before the dawn . . .

"I'm not giving you any of the supplies. We'll need your ration when Barrie comes with his friends."

"And you don't see me living the day out."

"No."

"You any idea how many there'll be, Sally?"

"Between six and a dozen I imagine."

"'Complete with all agricultural implements'. Ready to break soil. Plant. Sow. Reap. On the plot at the back of the garage. You're fundamentally naïve. You must be to believe a bum yarn like that. It can't be done. They can't do a thing with their poison darts. If armour piercing shells can't . . ."

"Few shells of any kind have been fired since the Dragons crushed us. Anyway, everyone seems to have his own personal little Weapon these days. Even you . . ."

She slaps the equipment.

*Touché. Fernscent.*

"What are you going to tell Danny?"

"That you ran away in the night of course."

"But . . ."

"And you had better be well off by the time Barrie arrives. I don't particularly want to see them murder you. He will kill you on sight, you know."

"If I'd only been home one time when he made his little call . . ."

"Get going."

"I'm on my way."

"And, George?"

"What?"

"Well . . . good luck."

"Goodbye, Sally."

"Goodbye."

A bitter parting without sorrow. Gentlefleece.

But now trudging through unfriendly mud. Cords and leather thongs burrowing into heaving chest. Torture. Fall onto knees in shallow pool. Plunge arms in. Splash the face. Drink, drink, but not too much. Hup! And on. To the main highway not more than a quarter of a mile distant. Surely. Thick black dinosaur excrement. Fresh droppings, so. Going at least in the right direction. Cross field, soggy, marshlike, watch out for bog. Soaked from waist down. Need to rest. Well past noon now. Grew would never chase this far or this long. Safe from him. Ah, some boulders to sit down on. Strangely rounded.

## EGGS.

Never thought to see these, ever. Dragon eggs, they say, are tough nuts to crack. This knife hardly scratches the shell. Shell? More like wizened leather. Give one a toe-kick. Ha-aaa. That is apparently not the correct approach. Feel about in mud for sharp stone. Better with sleeves rolled up. Noooooo—Yep! Ah. Give ancient Welsh war cry. And smash. It's broken. No smellies. Fresh and wholesome. Pour that almost jelloid protein into the wide hair surrounded mouth. Swallow as follows—gulpgulpgulp, breath, gulpgulpgulp, breath, etc. Delicious. Could do with some salt though.

Lovely. A good three days nourishment in this find. Look around for someplace dry and reasonably sheltered. Then roll the eggs over.

Screams?

From where? Along near the Highway over the hill, quickly.

Impossible to run in this rig. Shout.

"Run this way."

More screaming.

"I'm coming, run towards my voice."

Faster, man. Must walk faster.

Nearing the crest of the hill.

"HELLO. Run here!!"

Over the top.

About four hundred yards away. Cloverleaf flyover. Small tented colony left in obscene ruin under the bridge. Dragon munching with great carnivorous chomps of blood drooling mouth. No survivors? Two running people there. Approaching.

"Faster. It's coming on after you."

Close jet regulator valve. Click. Teeni gas flame.

"It's gaining on you. Come on."

Down on left knee. Release tank stopcock. Wowow. Throbbing in the hand like something alive.

"Dive down the hill behind me and lie flat. Watch out . . ."

Small running man swept into the jaws. High pain squeal

ut short by carnivorous belch from lizard. Woman follows instructions.

Aim into that face.

Long teeth, lead tongue, cardinal lips.

Open jet.

WHOOOORMOOOOOORRRMMF.

Magnificent reptilian beacon blazes on hillside.

Laminated hide completely imperforable. Completely inflammable.

Woman completely hysterical. Slap. Slap. Slap.

"Snap out of it."

"Run, run, quick. Getaway."

"C'mere. Can't you see that it's indisputably dead?"

"Impossible . . . how?"

"They burn beautifully. The armies found that out too late."

"What's the camp like?"

"Unwashed, slaughtering pen with bits of folks lying around."

"Good God. Ohh, God."

"Don't look at it. I'm George Herbert."

"Moira Collins, widow, and I'm . . . what? Indebted?"

"Yes, Those cuts need treatment, Moira."

"I'd prefer 'Mrs. Collins'."

"Too bad."

"The first aid kit in the camp was used up months ago."

"There's a complete medicine chest in a converted garage a few hours' walk from here. Only building in the area with a roof and walls intact. But I may have trouble getting inside. Where can I lay my hands on some petrol around here?"

"God knows."

"Quite probably."

In the camp, nothing but a quart of paraffin, and small tragic bottle of wine. Instantly imbibed. All the wine. Only three gulps of the paraffin. Gutsick. Vomit. Off along the city direction of the highway to unsteadily return some hours later to where she still sits. Under a middle-aged oak on the hillside. Kneel down beside her and take dressings

from small yellow tin box with red cross and 'First Aid' inscribed on it.

"You have a very gentle touch. Were you a doctor . . . George?"

"Oh no. I developed my caressing touch in another field."

"Ah yes, I can imagine. Did you see any Dragons?"

"Two, but they didn't seem to be hungry."

But I am. Silkenlimbs.

"Will we have to go on to this garage place tonight?"

"There was only petrol and the little kit in that collapsed filling station, and you should have medicinal treatment. Anyway, there is my little vendetta."

Darkness.

Travelling bumpily through the halfseen, and into the invisible. Seven journeying sore hours.

"That's it."

"Very quiet, George."

"Yes. Yes it is."

"Asleep?"

"Mmmm."

"A trap!"

"Melodramatic Moira."

"I'm afraid. Scared as Hell, George."

Healthy sign. Fleshbud.

"Lie still. I'll be back. Shortly."

"Getting dizzy . . . don't be long . . . please."

No moon. Good. Softly, quiet across the tarmacs. Don't tiptoe. Load on back endangers. No one standing watch. All nocturnal dinosaurs are strict vegetarians. No Dragons, which is considerate, except this one. Here. Side door will open silently and without forcing. Lock jammed with small pebble. Hinges oiled this morning. Preplanned vengeance. Inside. Close jet regulator valve. No lights under any door. Difficult. Click. Butane flame in nozzle. Awkward if someone notices tiny flicker of brightness in front shop. Release tank stopcock. It's shuddering. Ah, too much. Off balance.

Craaash.

Silence.

Wait . . . but still, silence.

Kick doors open. Run through infuriating empty room after empty room. Strangely bare.

"COME OUT, BUMS. SHOW YOUR TAILS!"

A small sobbing.

The carwash tunnel. The henhouse.

Heavy boot blow brings down corrugated iron 'door'.

No hens. But small screaming juvenile charging ferociously forward.

"Gerraway. Gerraway. Gerraway. Gerra . . ."

Smack.

"You are a bit over excited, Danny."

"Oh, Daddi, Daddi, Daddi."

"OK, soldierboy. OK. Calm down and tell me. Where's your Mum?"

"They did things to her. Horrible. Horrible."

"WHAT? Uncle Barrie and his . . ."

"Them, yes all of them, and they took Flor away, and the food, and everything, and the chickens, and oh, Daddi, Daddi, don't go away again, please, never again . . ."

"Never, Danny."

In the back of the henhouse. Right back lying naked in the straw against the far wall. All smashed limbs, broken face. One dying eye looks out. Pain, it says. Get rid of this wreckage.

"Go back inside, son."

"Yes, Dad."

Do you remember that other time we were alone in the darkness? You told me it was wrong to put out the light. People only used the dark to do things repugnant to them in the day. Then you laughed and passed a hand over my cheek. Sally.

Open jet.

WHOOOOOMM.

Today the sky is bright, cloudless. No wind. The sun is warm.

"You'll only be able to manage a couple of the eggs, and if you see a Dragon leave them and come straight back."

"All right, Dad."

"Mrs. Collins needs nourishment urgently."

"Dad . . . Why didn't you stay and fight those men."

"My plan was to come back and burn them up as they slept."

"OH. How long will it be until we've exterminated the dinosaurs completely?"

"HUH! Never. But the flame-thrower will give us a little more security while our petrol lasts. When it runs out we move to another garage."

"Will Mrs. Collins live?"

"Dunno. If those looters had left us the medicine I'd be a bit more certain."

Don't you die on me too, Sinblossom.

"You know, Dad, I think she was a teacher at Flor's school. Saw her there a couple of times."

"Oh aye? Well anyhow, here's a couple of shopping bags. Put one egg in each. Don't worry about dropping them. They won't break."

"I'm off then. I hope she gets better. She's really beautiful. All woman."

She's also mine. Scumdog.

— CHRIS BOYCE

*"Clueless we go ; but I have heard thy voice,  
Divine Unreason, harping in the leaves,  
And grieve no more ; for wisdom never grieves,  
And thou hast taught me wisdom ; I rejoice."*

(Aldous Huxley, "The Cicadas")

# THE GOLDEN COIN OF SPRING

by John Hamilton

It fell through the cool air of an April morning ; it was one of a billion thrown out into the Universe, like pebbles into the vast night ocean of space. Most were lost forever in the deep gulfs that separated the galaxies. Five had reached the planet Earth and four had sunk into the shadow depths of the sea to be eroded slowly away over the millennia. This was the fifth.

Its landing was recorded.

Dawn dew slithered in silence down the smooth surface of a blade of grass ; lower and lower. Contact. *Click . . .* H<sub>2</sub>O . . . *click*. The damp soil began to reveal its intricate secrets—zzzzz . . . 91.23 percent silicon-oxygen compounds . . . nitrogen, sulphur, potassium, magnesium, calcium . . . . . plant formation of chlorophyll, presence of photosynthesis, proteins . . .

"Open the door, Johnny, and let the Sun stand in the hall," Mother's voice was carried out clearly from the kitchen like a jangling bell.

Johnny, who was nine, carefully unlatched the door and stood and watched the warm morning sun stand in the hall. He stepped suddenly forward into its light, breathing in the chill morning air, and gazed down and along the pale jig-saw mosaic of paving stones which led down to the bottom of the long garden, where green and purple mists sifted silently around the base of the tall evergreen hedge, dancing in a ray of sunlight, then disappearing in the gloom of shadow. As he stood there watching the garden,



Dog came up from behind and brushed like wire past his legs, pausing as he caught some faint intriguing odour on the wind, damp nose aquiver, then rushing headlong down the stone steps and off toward the bushes, bent on some private mystery.

Beyond the garden the sun was rising over the sombre, grey outlines of the wood which spilled over to the east of the gentle hill upon which the house stood, isolated from the village. A winding path linked the hill house with the thatch-and-timber cottages of the village below and up it at this moment the Dandelion Girl was running, her soft blonde hair flying in the breeze, her eyes watering to its touch. She skidded wildly to a stop, panted through the gate, skipped gaily up the pavings, and on reaching the door shouted: "Johnny!"

Johnny wasn't there, but his mother came out, wished the breathless girl good morning and insisted the boy finish his breakfast before coming out. So she ran off to explore the big garden.

She threw stones, rushed her fingers through the whispering morning grasses, watched Dog slink quietly through the orchard on some unknown mission, then squatted in the middle of the lawn and minutely inspected the pastel roses. "If only I could paint," she said and sighed softly.

She spent some minutes dreaming wistfully of beautiful paintings of Dukes, Duchesses, and apples in early Autumn. Then, out of the corner of her eye she saw something glint among the roots of the rose-bushes. A sparkling object. She stooped and picked it up, weighing it in her child's hand. It was a circle of metal the colour of a buttercup: like a golden coin—yet too thick for any known money: more like the currency of giants, she reflected. She drew her fingers over its smooth innocent surface: there was no imprint. She polished it on her sleeve.

First contact with the animate. The sweat on her fingers was minutely absorbed and recorded and the salt content was analysed.

Johnny stood at the doorway waiting for the day.

"Johnny, here, come quick; look what I've found in the roses."

The boy crashed through the undergrowth to the girl and they both studied the strange round object.

"Is it money?" piped the girl and looked up.

"Mmmmmm," mused Johnny wistfully, "maybe, maybe not. Hey! Let's call it the Golden Coin of Spring."

"The—Golden—Coin—of—Spring," the girl played back the words and liked them, she smiled.

*Click.*

They both fell on to the cool dew grass with their new-found treasure. They tapped it, spun it, rolled it, played heads-and-tails, sighed at it, and began to feel sleepy.

A rare white butterfly fluttered delicately among the shadows of the rose-bushes, like a precious Oriental parchment playing magically upon the breeze.

The dandelion girl from over the hill talked about her dog Raffles having puppies and how they'd torn up the new rug and annoyed Mom, and . . . Their young voices rose and fell on the clear morning air.

The sun rose slowly in the sky and the day grew warmer ; the coin noted the rising temperature and the children's conversation.

Sometime later, Mother came out to hang up the day's washing.

Johnny wheeled round: "Hey, look at this, Mom."

"What have you got there?"

He held out his gem with pride. "It was lying among the roses. Julie saw it."

"Well, well, well. And what is it?" Mom asked in half-interest, looking at the metal object.

"Dunno."

"We call it the Golden Coin of Spring," perked in the small girl.

"That's nice," said Mother throwing billowing white sheets over the taut clothes-line. "And what are you going to do with it?" she asked.

They thought.

"Buy the world!" said Johnny and they all laughed.

*Click.*

All the smallest data: every word, every smell, every noise recorded and relayed back. It didn't make full sense.

Dry twigs were snapped and stems pushed back and Dog jumped through the foliage on to the lawn shaking a myriad seeds and old leaves over the children. His dark eyes burned with mystery.

He saw the round thing and stuck a damp imperious nose at it.

They both sensed each other.

Suddenly Dog's eyes brightened up and became lit with a familiar mischievous gleam. Through the chiarascuro shadows of the rose-bushes a grey cat was padding quietly and sensuously over the soil. Dog barked and jumped over the kids and the chase began.

"Let's play," suggested Johnny. "Which hand?" He thrust out two tightly clenched fists. The girl put a finger to her chin, her magnolia skin puckering into lines of concentration; then she spied a hint of yellow through his fingers and proudly won.

"Cheat!"

*Click.*

And so they played through the long morning, Dog paying them occasional visits, each time carrying a bristling coatful of new and unknown scents, and so the coin became a standard toy.

Dinner was called from the kitchen and they raced to the house in a commotion of pumping legs and arms a'flailing, and Dog won in the confusion.

As they ate and talked, from time to time they'd turn and glance over at the metal coin lying innocuously on the Georgian mantelpiece, and they would think about it. Bright silver spoons were dipped in graceful arcs. They wondered. "Where do you think it's come from?" "Maybe it grew," offered the dandelion girl peering through the curtain of long blonde hair which cascaded over her face as she bent forward to the soup. "Or flew," chimed Johnny. ". . . in with the Spring, I suppose," added his mother with a chuckle.

"Yes, yes," said the boy, half in earnest for a moment.

The three pairs of eyes turned again to look at the coin. "It's strange," said Johnny. "Pretty, though," said Julie. "And unfortunately, useless," concluded Mother clipping

their dreams and regretting it. "Well, I suppose it may have some use for somebody."

The coin rested there, passive but not inert, the most intricate and advanced mechanism in the world; an alien device from seven light years away, so sensitive that the varnish on the mantelpiece had already been correctly analysed and its age approximated, so strong that it could travel through seven light years of interstellar space without blemish.

All new data experienced by the coin was immediately received in the Planning Room of its makers on the distant planet *Abaddon*, the ninth planet of an unknown solar system seven light years away. The planners were anxious for the new information transmitted by their micro-mechanisms on Earth. But so far there had been little sense.

They considered the tape: some parts were very puzzling.

Mgmnn ran a skeletal forefinger through his white hair and rasped: "I do not understand how the micro-transmitter can be capable of purchasing this particular world for the young one. It is not rational." . . . and therefore incomprehensible to this race of logic. Laughter had to be considered as random static, devoid of intrinsic meaning. There was simply no alternative to understanding things in a purely formal sense, taking them at their face value.

Krragge nodded a thin logical head. "Computer data shows these beings at least to be primarily creatures of carbon and therefore may be liquidated by simple means. But before any operational decisions are made we must await further information regarding this world, as to its—eh—illogicalities and eccentricities." He grimaced.

The third man arose noiselessly and moved across to check the elaborate array of winking dials. With dark emotionless eyes, he glanced swiftly at the Earth section: four of the transmitters that had reached the third planet were transmitting only the eternal silence of the deeps and analysing the quiet ocean silts over and over again. The repetitive figures winked back at him almost like a joke, although, of course, the word was meaningless here. Devrille flicked a switch and seven light years away the four transmitters died on the ocean beds. He looked along

to the fifth and spoke in rapid, staccato tones to his fellows: "Atmosphere satisfactory. Plant life—carbon series—satisfactory. Apart from inhabitants, evidence of other species at a lower evolutionary stage." He was referring to the brush with Dog. He glanced over the other information which spidered in gaunt symbols over the out-pipe tape and concluded: "There is much unexpected."

The tape started restlessly again.

"Bring Mister Coin with you, Julie," called Johnny running out into the afternoon sun, dinner finished. The freckles on his face burned in the sunshine.

A tall figure was walking up the path appraising the luxuriant garden on either side.

Johnny jumped up.

"Hiy-ya, Dad. Come, see what we've found."

Father came over and inspected the disc of gold with an impressive air of knowledge, although, as his wife would often say, he couldn't tell a spanner from a corkscrew. Perhaps not the practical man-about-the-home, but certainly he'd a worthy sense of humour and it was a fine day.

The children crowded his legs. "Is it precious, Dad?" questioned Johnny, eyes alight. "Is it *magic*?" asked the dandelion girl, pushing her errant golden hair back from her face.

Dad put on a furrowed brow, perused over the coin, looked down at the expectant child faces and then, possessed of a sudden idea, smiled bright under the sun's glow: "It's magic all right, but only in the hands of a real magician," he said mysteriously, and breaking off a delicate water-blue rose-bud added: "Watch this."

The children looked up, bright-eyed, waiting for the magic.

The coin absorbed the scene, transmitting the thought impulses past the deep galaxies, over the light years.

Dad spun the golden coin high in the air, the sun winking and flashing on its revolving surfaces, and as it fell he snapped it into his fist, the children watching, bright eyes like buttons. Then he let it slip through his fingers, covered it with his foot, and slowly opened up his hand to reveal the pale rose-bud resting innocently in his palm.

"Abracadabra!"

The children hadn't noticed the sleight of hand.

"Yippee! Dad's a mandarin, a wizard, wheecee," they shouted out to the garden.

*Click.*

Head bowed, dandelion girl ran delicate fingers over the rose-bud-that-was-a-golden-coin and looked up through her fringing hair to the big kind wonderful man with the wise face. Dad smiled owlishly down and affected the enigmatic poise of the charismatic.

Eyelids shut over narrow eyes and then reopened. The thin passionless faces received the information with as much astonishment as their icy natures could muster. There was silence.

After a while, "Can the transmitter have been changed into an embryonic flower, is it possible . . . ?" asked one in slow, measured tones.

"Nonsense!" snapped another more as an act of instinct.

But they all thought, their dark eyes vacant, their cold impassive faces hiding confusion and some fear.

"Maybe we underestimated these—eh . . ." he left his words on the air.

Dad decided it was time to give up the game: "Anyone can do it, really. We're all magicians."

Together the three tall satanic figures turned to their note pads. With unblinking eyes they looked down through the strategic list of *Invasion Targets* and reaching number 29: Earth, simultaneously, they each drew a thin straight line through the word. They rose and stared at the luminous chart of the immediate Universe as though in reverence. Then, one coughed apologetically, another depressed a black switch on the grey computer bank and the fifth coin was deactivated just as it was solving its latest problem—a complex chemical analysis of shoe leather. He tore up the tape.

"Actually, I'll admit, it's not a magic coin or anything as wonderful as that," explained Dad, "it's just—well—an ordinary piece of metal."

In the glow of the late afternoon sun, the children's faces fell somewhat.

— JOHN HAMILTON

# PAVANE:



## LORDS & LADIES

by Keith Roberts

The group around the bed was utterly still, with the frozen stillness of sculpture. A single lamp, hung from a heavy beam, threw their faces into sharp relief, accentuated the pallor of the sick man as he lay with one end of Father Edwardes' violet stole tucked beneath his neck, the fabric stretched between them like a banner of faith. The old man's eyes rolled incessantly; his hands plucked and plucked at the bed-clothes. His breathing was short, noisy, obviously painful.

Beyond them, framed in the window against the blueing dusk sky of May, sat a girl. Her long, dark-blonde hair was bound in a *chignon* at the nape of her neck; one wisp had escaped, lay curling on her shoulder. It brushed her cheek as she turned her head; she pushed it aside irritably, looked down across the long roofs of the engine sheds to where a late train swung into the yard with a rattle and clash, manoeuvred toward its bay. The reek from it floated up to the casement; for a moment Anne seemed to feel the warmth from the steamer brush her face, tinging the mild air with giants' breath. She looked guiltily into the room. Her mind, half dazed, translated snatches of the priest's rumbling Latin.

*"I exorcise thee, most vile spirit, the very embodiment*

*of our enemy, the entire spectre. . . . In the name of Jesus Christ . . . get out and flee from this creature of God. . . .*

The girl twined her fingers in her lap, compressing them to feel the knuckle joints grind into each other, and lowered her eyes. The Dutch lamp hanging from the ceiling swayed slightly, its flame leaping and flickering. There was no wind.

Father Edwardes paused and lifted his head quietly to stare at the lamp. The flame steadied, burning again bright and tall. A muffled sob from old Sarah at the foot of the bed ; Tim Strange reached forward to squeeze her hand.

*"He Himself commands thee, who has ordered thee cast down from the heights of heaven to the depths of the earth. He commands thee, who commands the sea, the winds, and the tempests. . . . Hear therefore and fear O Satan, enemy of the faith, foe to the human race. . . ."*

Down below the loco chattered again, softly. Anne turned back unwillingly. Strange how the very sound of oiled steel could evoke such a tapestry of images. The summer-night roads, whitish grey ribbons trailing into the darkness, warm still with the sun's heat, owl and bat haunted ; buzz of early insects in the air, churr of feeding birds ; grass knee-long, rich as black velvet under the moon ; tall wild hedgerows heavy with the bloodpounding scent of the may. She wanted in an intense flash of longing to be clear of the room and the house, run and dance, roll in the grass till the stars spun giddy sparks above her face.

She swallowed, and made instinctively and automatically the sign of the Cross. Father Edwardes had counselled her very closely against any such levity of thought, any aberration that might herald the advent of a possessing and vengeful spirit. "For my child," the priest had warned solemnly, quoting from the *Enchiridion* of Von Berg, "they may approach mildly ; but afterward they leave behind grief, desolation, disturbance of soul and clouds of the mind. . . ."

A vein throbbed in Father Edwardes' temple. Anne bit her lip. She knew she should go to him now, join the force of her prayers with his, but she couldn't move. Something stopped her ; the same Thing that held her tongue at confession, wouldn't have her near the box. It seemed, if



such a thing were possible, that the long room was *skewed* ; twisted in some strange way, its walls discontinuous, the floor curving and waving, hinting at dimensions beyond the senses. As if the short distance that separated her from the group by the bed had become a gulf across which she had stepped to another planet.

She shook her head, irritable at the idea ; but the fancies persisted. She felt a moment of giddiness ; the swinging over nothing, the awful fetch and check of the falling nightmare. The room steadied on its new dimensions ; 'up' was now clearly represented by two differing directions. The lamp, hanging still, seemed to be twisted toward her ; at her back the window leaned away. She caught her breath, feeling stifled, and the scents and visions came again, soothing and lulling, profferings from Hell. Sweet musk of the may, fresh brown stench of new furrows where bread and other things were buried in defiance of Mother Church. . . . She wanted to call out, take hold of the robes of the priest and beg forgiveness, tell him to stop his mummeries because the fault and the evil lay in her. She tried to scream and thought she had but a deep part of her knew her lips hadn't moved. She could still see Father Edwardes as if through darkened glass, the hand falling and rising, making again and again the sign of the Cross ; she could hear the voice grind on but she herself was a million miles away, out among the cold burning of the stars and the balefires on the mounds of the dead where the Old Ones watched for all time. She was conscious dimly of a knocking and rattling rising to crescendo, the curtains flapping sudden and nauseating across the window. The lamp flame waned again, browning.

**"YIELD THEREFORE ; YIELD NOT TO ME, BUT TO THE MINISTER OF CHRIST. FOR HIS POWER URGES THEE, WHO SUBJUGATED THEE TO HIS CROSS. TREMBLE AT HIS ARM. . . ."**

The clanging in the room was thunderous. Anne fell upward, into night.

A voice calling in the darkness, strident and bright.

"Anne!"

"ANNE!"

A waiting ; then, "Will you come this *minute*. . ."

But the voice could be ignored, until its final utterance. 'Anne *Belinda* Strange, will you come. . .' That, the mystic invocation of the second name, must never go unheeded. To defy it would be an open invitation to slapping, to bed-without-supper ; and that was a terrible thing on a bright summer night.

The small girl stood on tiptoe, fingers clutching the edge of the desk top. Its surface stretched away from an inch before her nose, rich with wood grain, greasy, shiny, magical with the special magic of grown-up things. "Uncle Jesse, *what* are you doing?"

Her uncle put his pen down, ran his fingers through thick hair still black, touched with grey now at the temples. He shoved his steel-framed spectacles up to pinch at the bridge of his nose. His voice rumbled at the child. "Makin' money, I guess. . . ." Nobody could have told whether he was smiling or not.

Anne turned up her button nose. "Pooh. . . ." Money was an incomprehensible affair ; the word made a shape in her mind, bulky and brown as the ledgers over which her uncle toiled. Something far-off and uninteresting yet vaguely sinister. "Pooh. . . ." The grubby fingers curled on the desk edge. "Do you make a lot of money?"

"Fair bit, I reckon. . . ." Jesse was working once more, fist half obscuring the lines of neat figures crawling into existence on the thick cream paper. Anne cocked her head at him, trying to see his face, wrinkling her nose again. That last was a new accomplishment and she was proud of it. She said suddenly "Do I annoy you?"

Jesse grinned, figuring in his head. "No, lass. . . ."

"Sarah says I do. What are you doing?"

Steadily. "Makin' money. . . ."

"Why do you want so much?"

The burly man stopped open-mouthed, arms half raised ; an odd gesture. He stared at the low ceiling, the total lost now in his mind, then turned to scoop the child onto his knee. Grinning again.

"Why? Well I reckon little maid. . . . I reckon I couldn't rightly say now."

Anne sat watching, frowning a little and smelling the tobacco-nearness of him, chubby legs stuck out, well-picked scabs on the knees, the seat of her knickers black where she'd made a slide with Neville Serjeantson in the orchard behind the warehouses, out of some boxes and old steel rails. The yard foreman placed the rails for the children, to keep them quiet awhile. They were forever in the sheds, and underfoot when they backed the great iron engines; they were the bane of his existence.

"I reckon . . ." said Jesse. He stopped again, thinking and laughing. "Well, so's one day I could put a hundred thousand where once there were only ten. Only you wouldn't understand that, see?" He shoved vaguely at her hair, frowning at a tuft that had been yellow, was stuck together now with a dob of axle grease. "You bin in they sheds again? Sarah'll give thee summat, dang me if she don't. . . ."

"Not going with Sarah. Staying with you." The child wriggled, reached out for a rubber stamp and plonked it onto the blotter; then lacking further damageable surfaces, the back of Jesse's hand. Words showed faintly, bright blue against the brown seaming and wrinkling of the skin. *Strange and Sons of Dorset, Hauliers. . . .*

"Anne Belinda Strange. . . ."

Jesse swung her down and laughed, dusted her drawers for her as she ran.

The memory stayed with Anne; one of those odd, arbitrary moments out of childhood that seem to become enshrined in consciousness, never to be forgotten. Her uncle's lined, hard face, blue-jawed, close above her; the sunlight lying across the desk, Sarah calling, the stamp with its bulging black handle and the little brass stud that showed which way round it was when you pressed it down. A rare enough moment it was too, for Jesse was not an expansive man. His niece called goodnight to him later, standing at her window to see him leave the house, jacket slung across his shoulder, on his way to drink beer with his men at the *Hauliers' Arms* just along the street. But he'd

changed again then ; all she got back was the faint sour pulling of the mouth corners, the grunt he'd use to answer anybody as he slammed the door and tramped with a scraping and crunching of boots across the yard.

Jesse Strange had few words in those days ; and nobody willingly crossed him. He was a driver ; he drove his hauliers, he drove his machines, but most of all he drove himself. If he chose to drink he'd put the best man under the table ; that happened sometimes of a night down in the village inn. But he'd walk home steady ; and the boys, rolling across the street at chuckout time, would see the light burning in his office or in the sheds, where like as not he'd be stripping the valve gear on one of the locos or cleaning her boiler or mending her massive wheeltracks. They'd wonder then if Jesse Strange ever tired, and when he slept.

He'd made his hundred thousand a long time back, then his first half million. It seemed to him work was a sacrament, a panacea for all ills. The firm of Strange and Sons grew, spreading out beyond Dorset with depots as far away as Isca and Aquae Sulis. Jesse broke Serjeantson, his one competitor in Durnovaria, running his trains at cut-throat rates, stealing load after load from under the old man's nose. They said at the height of the war no train showed him a profit for nearly a year ; there were battles and beating among the drivers, blood spilled on the footplates ; but he broke Serjeantson and bought him out, added forty steamers to the huge Strange fleet. The sheds and warehouses that joined the old house at Durnovaria were extended again and again till they sprawled across more than an acre ; and still it wasn't enough. Jesse broke Roberts and Fletcher at Swanage ; then Bakers, and Caldecotts, and Hofman and Keynes from over Shaftesbury way ; and then he bought outright Baskett and Fairbrother of Poole, with more than a hundred Burrells and Fodens on the road, and Strange and Sons owned the West Country haulage trade. And after that even the *routiers* let their trains be ; because money works wonders in high places, and one swipe at a Strange loco would bring a hornet swarm of cavalry and infantry down round their ears and the game

wasn't worth the price. The maroon nameboards with their oval yellow plaques were known from Isca to Santlache, from Poole to Swindon and Reading-on-the-Thames; drivers gave way to them, the serjeants cleared the roads for them. In the end Jesse won respect even from his enemies. He paid his way, gave nothing; and what you could steal from him, you were welcome to keep. . . .

A lot of men wondered what drove him. At College he'd been a dreamer, head in the clouds; but somebody somewhere had taught him what life was about. Some whispered he killed a man once, a friend, and the empire he built was somehow his atonement; there was even a rumour he was jilted by a barmaid, and this was his answer to the world. Certainly he never married, though there were women enough later on who found they could put up with his ways, and men too who would have sold their daughters fast enough to tie their family to the name of Strange; but none of them got the chance. Nobody ever dared ask outright, except his niece; and though she remembered, as he'd warned her she didn't understand.

Anne seemed suddenly to be moved forward in time. She was going away to school, a whole twenty miles to Sherborne for her first boarding term. A half mile through the streets of Durnovaria, a little scrappet stumping along clinging to Sarah's arm, wearing a new uniform, leather satchel swinging from her shoulder, apples in the satchel and sweets, pitiful little bits of home. Head stuck high, face set, sniffing to stop from bawling at the wrongness of everything, on her way to death and worse. . . . Sarah seemed huge, the paving slabs huge and the cobbles and the old leaning houses, as afternoons and mornings had seemed huge, each bulking a separate entity in her mind as she crossed off the frightened days to start-of-term. The last night, last morning, an inevitability against which she seemed suspended, in a dream within a dream. The September dawn was blue with mist and cold, she buzzed with the chill of it while images floated unconnected and remote and her body was a machine, forgotten legs pumping her along. A road train passed at the end of the street and the light from the loco firebox glowed back on her steersman

and driver and the child wanted in sudden bitterness to run forward and be swept away, snuggle under a load tarp in the rumbling and darkness to end some mysterious closed circuit in her own room at home ; but instead she turned left mechanically to the station, still hanging on to her nanny's arm. Old Sarah, hated often, seemed lovable now ; but there was no help in her. The train was waiting, crowded and dank ; Anne was hustled on to it, stood pressing her face to the windows smudging the breath-steam with her fingers while Sarah and station and the whole of existence swept into a dot that dwindled behind her and vanished for all time.

And there was school, the big house dark and cold, and the strangeness of the nuns with their startling starched-white cowls, the whisper and shuffle of them crossing the stone floored rooms. A twilight of loneliness, sombre and unbearable, shot through at last with little gleams of hope ; letters from home, a cake, a box of fruit standing on the table in the hall. Frosty vividness of games days, whispered dormitory conversations, first stirrings of friendship. . . . Time passed quickly while Africa became a continent and  $\pi r^2$  was forced to equal the area of a circle and Caesar fought the Gauls. Other days and months declined impossibly and Christmas was near. A concert, services for end-of-term in the Great Hall ; candles burning in their sconces through the short December days, issuing of rail vouchers, excitement of packing and waiting ; the last morning, when Anne was taken mysteriously in charge by her house-mistress Sister Alicia. Shoutings in the grounds, noises rendered crystalline by the bright winter air ; flapping and chuffing of the butterfly cars thronging the front of the school while Anne waited feeling lost, the Sister secretive and smiling. And the great surprise ; first a rumbling, distant but known, a sound her blood could never forget ; and a plume of steam, a wink of brass as the loco, hugely unbelievable, edged her way along the drive, rutting Mother Superior's precious gravel with her great treads, hooting and shouldering and bluffing her way through the butterfly cars, her wheels as tall as the highest of their masts. She was towing a single trailer, its flat bed nearly empty, and

her uncle was driving and Anne knew he'd come specially for her and started, hating herself, to howl, while Sister Alicia muttered "ridiculous child . . . ridiculous child . . ." and prodded sense back into her with painfully bony fingers.

She was lifted up wincing with expectation to pull the cord that awoke the Burrell's huge deep voice ; while the children clustered round the wheels ogling and laughing till Jesse drove them back with shouts and thrust forward reversing lever and regulator and they were on their way with a fussing of valves and crossheads, a great jetting of steam. Anne clung to the hornplate staring back and waving as school receded, swept away by the windings of its drive to be lost and forgotten for a lifetime of three whole weeks. Often after that her uncle fetched her, or told off one of the men to detour. If he came it was always with *Lady*, the old Burrell that was still the pride of the fleet ; and Anne would boast endlessly to her friends and the mistresses that the loco had been named after her, she was her own special train. Jesse would laugh at that sometimes and shove her hair and say it were funny the way things worked themselves through. For the child's mother too had been called Anne ; her dad kept a pub out Swanage way and when he died and left her no place to live she'd been glad enough to settle for a man years her junior. Though it had cost Tim Strange his job and his home. . . . But it hadn't taken the woman long to tire of being the wife of a common haulier ; two years later she'd run off with My Lord of Purbeck's *jongleur*, and Tim had come trailing back with his scrap of a kid and Jesse had laughed quiet and long, made over to him the half of his business. But that had been in the long ago, before Anne grew a remembering brain.

Other later things were still fresh to her, other facets of her strange and wayward uncle. She remembered how one day she'd gone running to him with a shell, told him to listen and hear the waves inside. He'd taken time off from his endless making of money and driven her way up into the hills and found a quarry and dug a fossil out of the rocks and made her put that to her ear as well ; she'd heard

the same singing and he'd told her that was the noise the years made, all the millions of them shut inside buzzing to get free. She kept the stone a long while after that ; and when more time had passed and she knew the whispering and piping were only echoes of her blood she didn't care because she'd still heard what she heard, the sound of trapped eternities. . . .

The making of the firm had aged Jesse a lot ; that and a bursting steam union that poached the skin half off his back before he could stagger clear. The locos took their toll odd times of the men who used them ; he'd been up and about far too soon, passed out on the footplate trying to haul a load of stone single-handed to Londinium. Anne had been a gangling thirteen then, all legs and arms, her nipples already pushing marks into her dress. She'd nursed him well, sitting reading through the long quiet evenings of a summer holiday while Jesse lay and frowned and brooded at the ceiling and thought God alone knew what. But the thing had changed him for all time ; and so soon it seemed he was an old man on a bed, clammy and yellow and waiting to die, and the priest waving thin hands across him in the stink of incense, saying the grumbling words. . . .

The falling stopped. Anne looked round dazed ; she'd lived through years, but the room was quite unchanged. Her father watching down, thin face haggard in the lamp-light, old Sarah sitting pudgy and anxious twining her fingers in her lap, Father Edwardes still intoning, book in hand, the stole stretched tight ; the lamp flame was steady again now, clear in the spring dusk. She wiped her face furtively then her hand on her dress, pressed her knees together tight to stop the trembling.

This last week had been bad. The house shadowed, haunted. . . . Anne's mind shied away from the word. 'Possessed' was a worse one it hadn't till now occurred to her to use. The noises, the rattlings and tappings, night sighings and unease ; like the shadows of an ancient wrong, unrequited and unchangeable. While death stepped closer, inexorable, like the flowing of the rivers, the red night plunge of the sun behind the standing stones of the heaths. Once Jesse sat up, terrified and stark, moving his hands,



seeing things that weren't there to see ; once a maid shrieked at the icy fondling of the empty kitchen air ; once the landing reeled under Anne, an accident of Time maybe that let her see flitting ahead the *doppelganger*, shadow of herself, alien in the warm night. *Anne* was the name on the old man's lips now and his niece thought for a while he meant her, but it wasn't so. His hands waved, pushing at nothingness ; his eyes watched frightened as the spring breeze passed through the room, setting swaying the brasses on the beams, moving the lamps so the spindled yellow gleams shifted on mantel ornaments and bedrail. The steamer, Sarah thought he meant ; poor old thing to be frightened of her now, see her shadow in the swinging lamps and brass. But no, there was a rumour. . . . Watching alone, the girl sat shuddering ; she'd lived with the hauliers long enough to soak their daft tales in through her pores. The Burrell wouldn't fetch her master, she was down below locked in the engine sheds, fires drawn, tarps across her boiler, oak chocks hammered under her wheels. There was a steamer that came though, that was how the legend ran ; Cold Bess, swaying and black in the night and tall, Hell in her belly and her running lamps for eyes. There'd been a real Cold Bess once, far down in the West, and her driver strapped her safety valve to win a bet and she blew him to Kingdom Come ; but after that you still might hear her homing, her flywheel clanking and the rumble of the train wheels, her whistle shouting nights out on the hills. That was years back, nobody could say how long ; but the rumour stuck, grew into a silly story to scare the kids to bed with. When the hauliers spoke of Cold Bess, they meant Death. Anne, educated, still crossed herself hopelessly and shivered. Cold Bess was in the room. . . .

They took the brasses out and the candlesticks and ornaments and painted the bedrail top where it caught the light, and the silly old man lay quieter ; but the Presences wouldn't leave. Anne could feel them tugging and whispering ; cold spots floated on the stairs, once her shoes were snatched from her hand and slammed against the wall. That was when they sent for the priest ; and Father Edwardes made his feelings clear by the service he chose to read.

Prayers existed for the exorcism of the Noisy One, the *Poi-tergeist* ; but he had ignored them. The good Father had no doubt where the trouble lay ; he was conducting the rite for the expulsion of a devil. But he's wrong, Anne told herself, wrong ; and cried inside, silently. . . .

*"Therefore I adjure thee, draco nequissime, in the name of the immaculate lamb, who trod upon the asp and basilisk, to depart from this man . . . to depart from the Church of God. . . ."*

The voice faded, lost beneath more dreaming.

Anne, sweating again, tried to fight back because nightmare was coming and as in all such dreams she drifted closer and even closer to the thing she most wanted not to see. She asked herself could they then, the Things that knocked and fretted, the haunters, the *Old Ones* her mind whispered, the *Old Ones* . . . could they do this thing? Snatch her out of Space and Time, from under the very fingers of the priest? *Dare* they? She groaned helplessly. These were the People of the Heath, the Fairies ; they who once had known an ancient power. . . .

She was sitting on a beach. The sun, pouring and hot, struck her shoulders and arms and her knees under the little tabard that was the season's fashion must. Fair, she still tanned easily, the freckles exploding round her mouth and nose and across her back. She liked herself brown, she liked to loll on the beach and soak in warmth and light ; she'd fought for her day out, haggling with Tom Merryman to detour his Foden, drop her and pick her up. Sarah, faithful and complaining, had tagged along, jounced on the flat bed of the trail load, half choked by dust from the rutted white roads. Behind them the cars careered, veering and jostling, tiny engines sputtering, striped lateens filling in the puffs of breeze ; Anne swung her long legs and laughed at the drivers all the way down from Durnovaria to Golden Cap. At Lulworth Tom offloaded a case of machine tools before turning along the coast to Weymouth. Beyond the town the Foden swung inland again, routed for Beaminster ; Anne had dropped down, lugging Sarah, intent on her day on the beach, stood and waved till the Foden vanished under its own trailing cloud of

dust. Then Sarah had come over queer because of the heat and been taken to sit down under a tree and hear a band, and Anne scampered off to the water and sat by herself till the boat came in and all the people started running.

She asked herself then, why she always had to head into the centre of trouble. Privately she believed she must be a coward; reality was never as bad as the horrors of her imaginings. The time old William lost half his fingers in a workshop lathe; she'd heard the dreadful sound he made, seen the countershafts stop spinning as the foreman hit the emergency brake and had to run fast into the dimness to where Will stood ashenfaced holding his wrist; and seeing the blood pump bright from the fingerstumps, patter and ribbon on the floor, was nearly a relief. They'd told her later how good she'd been, she might have basked in the praise and enjoyed it but she knew it wasn't deserved. She hated, she sickened, but she just had to see. . . .

They took the tourists out from Wey Mouth, from the beaches and the harbour there, fishing for plaice and whiting and sharks sometimes when the season was right, the little basking sharks that did no harm to anyone but made good sport. It was a fishing boat that was coming in, and the boy on her had caught his arm in a winch and made the land somehow. Anne pushed through the crowd wriggling and shoving, sickness coming already and dark shadows at the edges of her sight, not able to stop; she saw the mess, tendon and bone showing in spikes and the man, reddened, holding himself with a hideous dignity, and didn't know what to do.

The car drove churning onto the beach, throwing sand, stopped for its driver to vault the door and come shouldering into the crowd. He must have taken Anne for a midwife or something, her throat was too dry to tell him he was wrong. She found herself in the back seat of the motor, squeezing the tourniquet, propping the injured man, seeing the blood run rich and soak into the upholstery. Just out of town a little station run by a half dozen Adhelmians served as the nearest thing to a hospital; the driver pulled in there and she sat while the boy was carried through the door and wondered whether to be sick then or later. After

a time she got out, not really conscious of what she was doing, and started to walk. Sarah was forgotten; she was in a desolate mood where she seemed to see all humanity as bags of skin waiting to be burst and die in pain, herself a woman trapped in a fragile body, bleeding in childbirth, bleeding in coition. She was very shocked, and felt like death.

The beach she reached finally seemed to stretch for miles. She followed the cliffs above it, walking from headland to headland, seeing the vistas of white and blue, sparklings of salt spray in the wind, aimless and objectless. She got to the sea by a sandy slither, thought she might bathe then remembered instead she had something to do and was formally sick behind a stand of gorse. Then she sat on a rock that hurt her behind and brooded, picking pebbles from round her feet and flicking them at the water, seeing the sun burn off the sea in skeins and dancing loops of light. The voices when it came hardly penetrated her consciousness; the stranger had to shout again.

"Hi. . . !"

He was heavy and bearded, red-faced and not used to being ignored. Anne turned, and regarded him despondently.

"What the Devil d'you think you're doing?"

She shrugged. Her shoulders indicated 'Sea. . . .' and 'Throwing pebbles in it. . . .'

"Just come up here, will you?"

Another shrug. *You come down. . . .*

He did, with a crashing and a rattle. "Fine bloody dance you've led me. . . ." He pulled up her chin insolently with a thick-fingered hand. "Yeah," he said, nodding. "Pretty good. . . ."

Her eyes burned at him. Then, "Is he dead?" She asked the question listlessly; the moment of anger had passed, leaving her drained out and flat.

The stranger laughed. "Not him, plebeian bastard. . . . Blood poisoning might sort him out but I shouldn't think so. They generally live. . . ."

"What did they do?" A husk of interest in her voice.

The Norman—for they were speaking, almost uncons-

ciously on Anne's part, Norman French—shrugged. "Nothing to it. Over in a flash. Pantryman's cleaver, pot of tar. You leave the vein sutures sticking out, pull 'em through when they rot. . . ."

She rolled her lips, squaring the corners. His hand was on her again instantly. She knocked it off. "Just leave me alone. . . ."

A tussling. "You're a good-looking little bit," he said. "Where d'you hail from then, haven't seen you about. . . ." She swung a fist at him. "*Fils de prêtre*. . . ."

He reacted as if she'd stabbed him with a bayonet. He flung her away, stood over her; for a moment she thought she was in for a beating, then he turned away in disgust. That," he said, "wasn't smart. . . ." Sand had got in his eye; he knuckled it furiously, swearing, then started to climb back up the cliff. Halfway to the top he turned and shouted. "You're scared. . . ."

Silence.

"You're a little prig. . . ."

No reaction.

"*It's a bloody long walk back*. . . ."

Anne got up, nostrils pinched with fury, and followed him to the car.

It sat seething faintly, straps across the bonnet vibrating, seemed to hunch between its widespread wheels. He handed her in—the door was about five inches deep—got in himself, released the brakes and shoved at what she supposed was the regulator. The Bentley gathered speed with a vicious thrusting, in a silence that was nearly eerie, trailed by the faintest whisp of steam. Anne sat rigid, sunwarmed leather under her thighs, wondering why she'd never been able to resist a dare, whether it was something in her that couldn't grow up. The driver looped away from the coast and turned east again. The rutted roads were unkind to the motor; he leaned across once and shouted something about 'Do two hundred on macadam', then relapsed into silence. Anne realized more fully what she'd known before, that he came from no ordinary stock. Technically steam cars were permissible; but only the wealthiest dare own them, could in fact afford them. *Petroleum Veto* had long

been tacitly recognised as a bid to restrict the mobility of the working classes.

Passing through Wey Mouth she thought of old Sarah still scraping about looking for her charge, driving the local peelers crazy no doubt by this time. She yelled to stop but the driver ignored her; only the sidelong gliding of his eye, bright and bad-tempered, showed he had heard. Outside the town the rain came. Anne had seen it building up for some time; the storm clouds ahead, dusty yellow and grey, piling against the midsummer blue of the sky. She yelled as the first drops hit her, slashing over the tiny windshield. He bellowed back, "Didn't bring the bloody hood. . . ." A mile farther on he lost steam and condescended to stop under a huge oak but by then Anne was so wet she didn't care anyway. She was glad when he drove on, away from the booming of the branches.

Corvesgeat showed on the horizon, a cluster of towers like fangs of stone. The rain was easing. They passed through the village the focus of a yapping herd of dogs; the Bentley's burners hit them in the ultrasonic, drove them wild. Her driver crossed the square and swung into the castle, under the portcullis of the outer barbican. The gatekeeper saluted as the car bounced past. A fair had camped in the outer bailey; Anne saw golden dragons, caryatids rain-wet and erotic against grey stone. Show engines stood about, only slightly more ornate than the Lady Anne herself. The Bentley thumped across the grass, blasting folks from her path with her twin brass horns. At the Martyr's Gate the portculli were grounded to keep the people from the upper baileys and the precincts of the *donjon*; Anne saw steam jet from the high stone as the winches raised the iron trellises for the car. Then they were through, sidling up a slope that looked one in one, the bonnet higher than their heads. The Bentley docked finally in a stone garage set below the soaring walls of the keep.

Above them, dizzyingly far off, floated banners; the oriflamme, ancient and spectacular, flown only on Saints' days and holidays, the bright blue of Rome, the swallow-tailed Union flag of Great Britain. The leopards and Fleurs-de-Lys of the owners of Purbeck were absent, so His Lord-

ship was not in residence. Anne caught glimpses of the flags and the high walls, sunlit now, through roofless passages as she scurried behind her captor, one wrist gripped in his paw, too breathless to argue any more. She lost all sense of direction; the castle was a great confusing mass of stone, hall after hall, building after building stacked and added round the colossal massif of the *donjon*. She saw through arrowslits past a spurred drum tower, across a vastness of heathland clear to the harbour of Poole; she climbed a stair set curling into a buttress to a chamber where Lord Robert of Wessex, son of Edward Lord Purbeck, swung irritably at a bellrope that threatened to disintegrate under his attentions. Anne was given, kicking, into the charge of a burly female in the brown and scarlet livery of the House. "*Do* something with it," swore Robert, flapping his arms. "Take it off and bathe it or something, before it starts to sneeze. It stinks of the sea. . . ." Anne, furious, tried to swing round on him but the iron-studded door had already slammed. At her spluttered accusations of kidnapping the servingwoman laughed. "What, with his mother at home? He keeps his own nest clean, ye can be sure of that. . . . Oof. . . . Come on now m'lady, don't be crossgrained. . . . Ow, you little beast. . . ."

The room to which Anne was lugged, and in which she was deposited spitting, was by the standards of the place small. Delicate perpendicular arches supported windows of stained glass that repeated glowingly the heraldic motifs of leopards and lilies. Brocade draperies covered part of the walls; in the floor was a massive bath built of slabs of polished Purbeck marble. Over it loomed an ornate geyser, black japanned, replete with rings and polished curlicues of copper. Grilles in the walls covered what were evidently the vents of a warm-air system. Anne was impressed in spite of herself; her home at Durnovaria was well equipped, but this was a standard of luxury she had never seen.

Two girls attended her. She frowned, half minded to send them packing; she was distinctly unused to being bathed. Sister Alicia used to scrub her sometimes when she was first away at school; 'Come along' she'd say, 'you unsavoury little thing', and bang her down in one of

the great square tubs, already swilling with icy water, and let fly at her with a large hard-bristled brush, and sometimes she nearly enjoyed it ; but that was years ago, a lot of things had changed.

Anne shrugged, and started to wriggle out of the tabard. If this crazy young nobleman cared to waste the time of his housepeople on her then the chance was too good to waste ; it would probably never come again.

The bath was filled rapidly, with much snorting and hissing from the geyser ; the maids bound her hair, and one of them added to the water a handful of something that produced great towering masses of iridescent foam. That intrigued her, she'd never seen anything like it. An hour later she was feeling nearly inclined to be civil again ; she'd been scrubbed and kneaded and massaged, and had to kneel upright while they poured on her shoulders something that smelled of sandalwood and ran and burned like fire and left a splendid glow in the muscles of her back that soaked away stiffness and tiredness. There was a dress laid out for her, a formal thing with a wide scooped neckline and miles of frothy skirt, and a diamanté circlet for her hair. The clothes fitted ; she wriggled, feeling the satincleanness of her skin against the cloth, and wondered a little wildly just how well Robert had equipped the castle with the apparatus of seduction. She found out later he'd ordered his absent sister's wardrobe ransacked for the occasion ; whatever his faults, he certainly never did things by halves. She was badly worried now about Sarah and her parents, but events seemed to have passed her at the gallop ; it was bad enough just trying to keep pace.

It was evening before she was through, the sinking sun throwing mile-long shadows across the heath, waking blazing reflections from the tier on tier of diamond-lighted and mullioned windows ; the castle seemed to butt against the huge western haze like the prow of a stone ship. Sounds from the fair floated across the baileys ; shouts, the din of the organs, the grumbling vibration of the rides. Dinner was served in the sixteenth century hall built alongside the *donjon* ; the diners promenaded outside it, richly dressed, arm in arm in the warm air. Anne was vaguely disappointed



when she learned the great keep had been disused for centuries except as storehouse and armoury.

On high days and holidays the Lords of Purbeck were accustomed to take their meals in the ancient way reintroduced by Gisevius; the less favoured guests sat at long tables in the body of the hall while the family and their personal friends ate on a raised dais at one end. Lamps burned in profusion, lighting the place brilliantly; the minstrels' gallery was occupied by a small orchestra; servingmen and girls scurried about tripping over the dogs, *brachets* and mastiffs, that littered the floor. Anne, still a little dazed, was introduced to the Lady Marianne, Robert's mother, and to the half dozen or so important guests. Her mind, whirling, refused to take in the names. Sir Frederick something, His Eminence the archbishop of somewhere else. . . . She curtsied automatically, allowed herself to be steered finally to a place at Robert's right. A cold nose shoved into her lap warned her she was attended; she fondled the *brachet* absentmindedly, tickling beneath the ears, and drew from her host a grunt of surprise. "You're honoured, y'know that? Doesn't take kindly to anybody, not that one. Had a swipe at one of the serjeants the other day." He grinned broadly. "Three fingers. . . ."

Anne gently withdrew her hand. Mutilation seemed for Robert a major source of fun.

He'd heard her name more than once, introduced her by it a dozen times, but it seemed it hadn't sunk in. She asked him, with as much dignity as she could muster, for a message to be sent to her home. Her eyes hadn't missed the semaphore rigged beside the keep, or the chain tower on the nearby hill. He listened, looking faintly surprised, bending his head to catch the request, then snapped his fingers to the signaller-page hovering nearby. "Who'd ye say, Strange?"

"My father," said Anne coldly, "is Timothy Strange of Strange and Sons, Durnovaria."

The bombshell was not without effect. Robert grunted, raised his eyebrows, swigged wine, drummed a tattoo on the linen cloth. "Well, damme," he said. "Damme. Well, I'll marry a bloody Bulgarian. . . ."

"Robert. . . J" That from the Lady Marianne, a little farther along the board. He bowed to his mother, unabashed. "I see," he said. "Well, you're a bad-tempered young bitch. I suppose that goes a way to explaining it. . . ." He scribbled on the pad proffered by the Signaller. "Look lively with that lad, or we shall lose the light." The boy departed, scampering ; a few minutes later Anne heard the clack and bang of the semaphore, the answering clatter from the great tower on the hill. An acknowledgment was backrouted before nightfall ; just a frosty 'Message received and understood.' From that, she presumed she was in disgrace.

The night passed quickly enough, too quickly for Anne ; she could imagine well enough the surly reception waiting for her at home. The dinner was followed by an entertainment by a troupe of acrobats and fairground people. Trained dogs bounced through hoops, ran on their back legs in kilts and breeches ; the affair was a great success. The near-demise of one of the performers, caught and tossed by Robert's delicate-tempered hounds, scarcely dampened proceedings. The animal act was followed by a *jongleur*, a long-faced, mournful-looking man who, evidently primed by Robert, delivered a series of rhymes in a thick patois that Anne perhaps fortunately couldn't follow but that set him roaring with amusement. Then trays of nuts and fruit were passed, and more wine ; the party broke up well past midnight, Robert bellowing for linkboys to escort Anne to the room he'd had prepared. She decided abruptly, trying to stand without swaying, that it was just as well nobody was fetching her tonight ; the rich Oporto, once restricted to the tables of kings and the Pope, had nearly proved too much for her. She collapsed in a warm haze, mumbling goodnights to the woman who relieved her of her clothes, and was asleep within minutes. She woke soon after dawn, lay listening for the sound that had roused her. She heard it again ; a dog barking, far-off and bright. She got up fuzzily, draped an embroidered counterpane round herself and padded to the long slit of a window. She saw far below over a tumble of roofs Robert, two *brachets* circling the heels of his horse, ride

across the lower bailey to the gate, falcon sitting his wrist like a little blind and bright-plumed knight. The ringing barks of the dogs sounded on the quiet air a long while after their master had gone from view.

At eleven that morning a Foden, maroon-liveried, puffed its indignant way through the outer barbican, its driver demanding the person of one Miss Strange; and shortly after Anne bade goodbye, regretfully to the great castle of Corfe Gate.

Once home she found things weren't as bad as she'd feared; the family, with the exception of Sarah, were more impressed by her jaunt than annoyed. It took a lot to impress a Strange; but the Lords of Purbeck owned most of Dorset, their demesne stretched to Sherborne and beyond. Once they'd been landlords to Jesse himself, until he'd scraped and saved and bought the place in fee simple. Her uncle approved, in his silent way; and that counted for a lot. He sat with her that night while she told him how things had gone, pulling at his pipe and frowning, throwing the odd quick question that brought out every last detail. But Jesse was an ailing man already, illness marking and greying his face.

Again Anne was scurried forward in time. It was as if the images presented themselves with all the ghostly, flickering speed of the yet-to-be-invented cinematograph. She remembered the brooding and waiting, the hoping for some sign that Robert hadn't forgotten her totally. She tried to analyse what she felt about him. Was it just his craziness that appealed to her, was she attracted to the sheer animal maleness of him or was it something deeper? Or more reprehensible, the simple urge to sell herself in the best market possible, set herself up above the rest, above her own family, as mistress of Corfe Gate? She told herself if it was that, to forget it, stop dreaming third-form dreams. Because she never would belong in that great place down there on the hill. . . .

Autumn came and the carrying-in of the sheaves, the services for Harvest Home. The hauliers plaited new corn dollies out in the sheds, hoisted them into the house eaves

to replace the old dusty shapes of last year that were ritually burned. Anne was kept busy in the kitchens supervising the laying-in of preserves for the winter ahead, the bottling and jam-making and salting-down of meat; and the locos came in one after another off the freezing rutted roads, travel-stained, rusting, to be refurbished in the sheds, greased and oiled and polished and painted for the next year's work. Every bolt must be checked, worn wheel-treads replaced, valve gear stripped and reassembled, steering chains examined and tested. The forges bellowed all day long, fanned by blackened imps of hauliers' boys; lathes hummed, men swarmed over the towering Burrells and Clayton and Shuttleworths. There was labour to spare; for Strange and Sons, alone in the haulage trade, didn't lay their people off. Jesse as ever worked with his men, listening head cocked to the huge beating locos, touching and diagnosing; only from time to time the griping pains doubled him and he swore and went off and rested and drank his beer, and buckled to it again.

The days shortened to midwinter; Christmas was barely a week away when the bailiff, breath steaming, redlined cloak wrapped round him against the cold, cantered into the house yard. Anne cracked the seals off the letter when it was brought her, hands shaking. She frowned over the scrawled, ill-spelt lines; written, she realized with a sudden furious rush of feeling, by Robert himself. She pelted to the engine sheds, to tell her uncle first of all. She was bidden forth to the Christmas celebrations at Corvesgeat, to be one of the hundred-odd guests at a house party that if it ran to the form of other years could easily last till March. Her acceptance was put into the bailiff's hand while he was still puffing in the kitchen and swigging at a jug of mulled ale.

She hunted Jesse out again next day before she left, when the horses were already snorting in the yard. He was working as usual in the sheds refitting the head of a piston to its shank by the blue light that filtered through the long frost-muffled windows. She felt pain when she saw the peaked sharpness of his face, lines drawn and set round the hard mouth; suddenly she didn't want to go but he

was gruff with her. "You bugger off" he said directly, "While you'm got the chance. . . ." He brushed her forehead with his lips, slapped her behind like he used to when she was a kid. He walked with her to the door, stood waving till she was out of sight ; then turned grimacing, leaning on a bench and rubbing his side, a half-unconscious gesture to ease pain. The spasm passed, the shadows stopped being red-tinged ; he wiped his face, and went heavily back to his work again.

At the outskirts of Durnovaria an escort was waiting. Anne, muffled in the biting cold, thrilled at the troop of crossbowyers before her, the outriders scouting the heath to either side for signs of the *routiers* ; the Lords of Purbeck evidently took no chances with the safety of their guests. It was a long ride, the wind biting at her face and ears, the hooves of the horses ringing on the hard ground ; the light was fading before she saw the castle again, grey stone against an iron-grey sky, touched with a thin high powdering of frost. At the outer barbican the portcullis was down ; the wind skirled, the great place above stared with blazing eyes of windows. The party waited, horses snorting and stamping, while the chains creaked, the iron ground out of sight into the stone. Excitement had made Anne forget her uncle ; she laughed at the crash of the gate behind her, the challenges of the sentries on the inner walls. The castle was invested alike by winter and the dark.

She remembered dancing and talk and laughter ; Masses in the tiny chapel of Corfe Gate, rides down to the coast to see the storm-flattened Channel ; fires roaring in the Great Hall, warmth of her bed on moaning nights of wind. She learned partially to fly a hawk, the little gentle falcon deemed fit for the sport of ladies. Robert gave it to her but she refused it ; she had no place to keep it, no mews, no liveried falconer to see to its needs. Finally it escaped, winging high and strong, and she was glad ; it seemed to belong to the wind.

Robert, largely to impress his guests, attempted to train a golden eagle, brought down at his request from the wild hills of Scotland. On its first flight the wretched bird took refuge in a tree, and all efforts to dislodge it proved in

vain. Two servants of the household were left to watch it but they came back empty-handed ; the creature had given them the slip in the gathering dark, refusing the lure. The thing finally returned two nights later, to perch forlornly on a tower of the outer barbican ; and Robert, swearing vilely and drunk as a newt, vowed the prodigal should be fittingly greeted. Nothing would suffice but that the castle's one demicannon, an ancient piece never fired in living memory, be laid and trained, and shot and powder broken out from the armoury. The ball knocked a cubic yard of masonry from the wall by the gate, nearly decapitating the serjeant of the pantry and frightening a female guest into hysterics while the benighted bird, blown by the concussion from its perch, winged heavily away, never to be seen again.

On New Year's Eve Robert took Anne on the long climb to the heights of the ancient keep. They stood at a slitted window, five hundred feet and more above the heath, the wind burning their faces and keening at the stone while Robert laughed at the witch-fires burning all round, twinkling on the horizon like eyes. Somewhere a wolf called, quavering and high ; Anne shivered at the ancient lost noise coming in from the dark. He saw the movement and wrapped his cloak round the both of them, standing behind her, arms crossed in front of her waist ; she turned snuggling, feeling his warmth and the slow movement of his hands, pushing her face at his shoulder while he stroked the hair that flicked round her eyes and she wanted to cry for the passing of time and all transient things. They stood an hour while the bells pealed in the village, doors and windows opened yellow rectangles far below and the fires sank and vanished. On more than one calendar, a new year had begun.

After that she went down to Corvesgeat again and again, while winter turned to spring and spring to high summer. She watched the Morrismen dance in the bailey Midsummer's Eve, fed the hobbyhorse with coins its clacking wooden teeth couldn't hold ; once Robert, the Bentley in dock with a smashed front spring after some spree, damn-blasted a butterfly car as far as Wey Mouth before, his

temper shattered, he fulfilled his own threat to push the thing off Golden Cap. Through the year the notes would come to Durnovaria, brought by a soldier or a bailiff on his rounds. Anne puzzled the future Lord of Corfe, maybe worried him a little. She wasn't of his blood; but neither did she think like a commoner, the serfs he would blow from his path with blasts of the Bentley's horns. She didn't blush and simper, giggle like a village slut when he stroked her breasts; she was grave and quiet and always it seemed had some sadness in her eyes. For her part Anne felt unspoken things to exist between them, understanding deeper than words. In his own way, under the blustering and Hell-raking, he needed her; one day, formally, he would ask her to be his wife.

She shuddered, remembering the end of her world. An August night, the grasshoppers making their endless shrieking; the sound seemed to soak into brain and blood, compelling with its insistent strangeness, now heard, now unheard and heard again. The castle bulked high in the warm dark and all round, in the baileys, on the walls and motte, far below in the tree-grown wet ditch, the glow-worms burned like lime-green sequins stitched onto the black velvet of the grass. She cupped one in her hand; it glowed there still, distant and mysterious. There was a smell in the air, warm and heavy, the tang of early autumn. A breeze touched her face; it seemed to her excited fancy the wind blew from some strange past.

Robert was brooding, silent, in a mood she hadn't seen. A fire was burning up by the kitchens, the glow wavering on stone, limning the huge pile of the *donjon*. Flakes of ash were whirled up sparkling in the sky; he said to him they were like the souls of men moving through endlessness, shining awhile then vanishing in the dark. He didn't use his born language; instead he spoke an old tongue, a clacking guttural she'd never realized he owned. She could answer him; she stood close giving sentence for sentence, trying to comfort. She spoke of the castle. "*Rude, ragged nurse,*" she said, "*old sullen playfellow for tender princelings. . .*"

He seemed surprised at that. She laughed, her voice muted in the night. "One of those minor Elizabethans, we

had to do him at school. I forget his name ; I thought he was rather good."

"How does it finish?"

"*Use my babies well, . . .*" She spoke almost wonderingly, aware for the first time of the chill under the words. "*So . . . foolish sorrow bids thy stones . . . farewell, . . .*"

It made him angry, unaccountably. "Auguries," he said, and spat. "You're like a priest in a bolthole, mumbling bloody spells. . . ."

"Robert. . . ." She was close to him, she moved closer. She laid her face against his, lips parted to let tongue and teeth touch his jaw, trying to stop the sadness in him, feeling his hands move tracing beneath her thin dress the course of her spine. She'd touched him often enough and kissed ; his fingers used her familiarly, enjoying her as his eyes enjoyed the keen head of a hound or the flight of a hawk, as his mouth savoured the taste of food and good wine. She thought, this time it is different. If he goes on now, and if I let myself go on, then there'll be only one end. And is it so important after all?

She swallowed, closing her eyes ; and it seemed then for the first time the turning and twisting, the falling, the sense of dimensions and time skewed, plagued her. She clung tighter whimpering, feeling herself not standing on solid turf but bowled solemnly end over end through a void, haunted by all dead things and sorrows and future fears, lumped and bundled and blown along a Norman wind. She thought, perhaps I shall faint. What's happening to me. . . . She tried to call up images to set against the dark ; her father, Sarah, her uncle Jesse, people she'd known back at school, even old Sister Alicia. It seemed to her obscurely that what she wanted to do involved more than herself, her body and her pain. It was to *them*, all the people she'd ever known, she had to answer ; for *their* sake her choice had to be right. She felt a hotness on her cheek and knew it was a tear ; though whether for herself or Robert or all humankind she couldn't say. She lay with him that night, coming to him again and again, comforting and being comforted, sometimes mother-giving, sometimes a child



wrapped away from the dark ; till even her lover drifted from her, lost behind a sleep too deep for dreams.

Lord Edward's seneschal roused her—he of all people—with the story that Robert had been called off on the King's business, that he was to see her home. She lay quiet in the tousled bed, still half-dazed with sleep ; and slowly the anger grew. She read in his queer eyes and chiselled-cat face, the face she could oddly never recall once he had turned away, what she already knew deep inside. That the enchantment, if it was enchantment, had ended ; that she'd sold herself for a pretty song, that Robert was in his senses now, that a Lord of Purbeck would never mix his blood with a girl of the rank and file. She drove the seneschal away snarling and spitting, rose and looked at herself, turning the mirror to show her new slut's body ; she washed herself, splashing the water from the ewer angrily on the floor. The bed was marked ; she wrenched the covers back raging, left them for all the world to see. She swore at the seneschal when he fetched her, stamping and vowing revenges she knew she could never call down ; not herself, not her father, not the mighty firm of Strange with all its money and power. Because there was no law in this land, not for commoners. Rich and poor alike they held their places by the whim of their Lords ; and the Lords got theirs in feoff from the English king, and he sat his throne by the grace of the Throne of Peter. The demi-cannon, glaring out there through the gates, that was the law. . . .

In the outer bailey she thought a houseservant smiled ; if she had had a weapon in her hand she would have killed. She left riding like the wind, slashing her horse till the blood ran, hurting herself in the jolting saddle, the seneschal pacing her impassively twenty yards behind. They'd marked her up, like they'd mark a split crate off the road trains ; *soiled goods, return to sender*. . . . She turned a mile away from the castle, saw it watching her and cursed. There were tears on her face again and on her throat ; but they were tears of rage.

“FOR THEE AND FOR THY ANGELS IS PREPARED THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE ; BECAUSE

THOU ART THE CHIEF OF ACCURSED MURDER,  
THOU ART THE AUTHOR OF INCEST. . . . GO OUT,  
THOU SCOUNDREL, GO OUT WITH ALL THY  
DECEITS. . . . GIVE HONOUR TO GOD, TO WHOM  
EVERY KNEE IS BENT. . . ."

Why thought Anne haggardly, he's talking about me. . . . The journey and the castle had been in her mind; the tears were real. They ran down hot, wetting her neck. *Is this the best you can do?* she asked Father Edwardes silently. *To plague this old man with your mumming while I sit here free who've brought the evil and the wrong into this house?* Of course, her mind answered itself scornfully. Because he like the Church he serves is blind and empty and vainglorious. This God they prattle on about, where's His justice, where's His compassion? Does it please Him to see dying people hounded in His name, does He snigger at His bumbling priests, is He satisfied when men drop dead chopping stone out for His temples, this twisted little God dying tepid-faced on a cross. . . . She thought, I'll go out and look for other gods, and maybe they'll be better and anyway they can't be worse. Perhaps they're still there in the wind, on the heaths and the old grey hills. I'll pray for Thunnor's lightning and Wo-Tan's justice, and Balder's love; for he at least gave his blood laughing, not mangled and in pain like the Christos, the usurper. . . .

The house trembled and went out like a candleflame in a draught. She was falling again, dropping through space where sparks that were like stars or glow-worms burned. She seemed all in the same instant to see Corfe loom at her with its skull face, the sea beyond whipped white by breaking waves, the cliffs tall in the droning wind; the Dorset wind, ancient and cold and keen, in from all the miles on miles of ocean.

The rushing stopped; and she stood and stared round her in wonder. From the past she had moved to the future, or to some Time that had never been and never would be. Above her was a whirling sky; and round about on either side rose pillars hacked from rough stone, old and textured, leaning, mighty, fretted and worn, tortured by the

centuries into holes for the wind to nest in. The cloud scud swirled, driving past them ; beyond the wind seethed across a grey circle of grass. Beyond again was nothingness ; a void into which she might tumble, fall off the sudden edge of the world.

In front of her, seated with his back against the farthest of the pillars, was a man. His cloak swirled ; his hair, long and light, lifted and blew about his round skull. She put a hand to her head. The face, she'd seen it before but where. . . . Even as she watched it seemed to alter, running and shifting, becoming the face of a thousand men, of no-one. Of the wind.

She walked, or seemed to walk, toward him. In the dream she could speak ; she made words, a question. The stranger laughed. His voice was ready and thin, as if it came from a great distance. "You called on the Old Ones" he said. "Who calls on the Old Ones, calls on me."

He gestured for her to be seated. She squatted in front of him feeling her hair flack round her face. The wind scourged at the strange place ; then as she stared it seemed suddenly there was no wind, that she and the stones and the grass they stood on were being whirled at immense speed through an endless sea of cloud. The thought was giddy ; momentarily she closed her eyes. "You called upon our gods," said the Old One quietly. "Maybe it was their pleasure to answer. . . ."

She'd seen now, in the stone over his head, the mark she'd known must be there ; the circle, the crab-lines inside, overlapping and incomprehensible. She said faintly "Are you . . . real?"

Amusement showed in his face. "Real?" he said. "Define reality and I can answer you." He waved a hand. "Look into solid earth, into rock, and see the galaxies of all Creation. What you call reality melts ; there is a whirling, a spinning of forces, a dance of motes and atoms. Some of them we call planets, one of them is Earth. Nothingness within, nothingness enclosing nothing, that is reality. Tell me what you want, and I can answer."

She put a hand to her forehead again. "You're trying to confuse me. . . ."

"No."

She blazed at him. "*Then leave me alone. . .*" She beat her fists on the grass helplessly. "I haven't done anything to you, stop . . . playing with me or whatever it is you do, just go away and let me be. . ."

He bowed, gravely; and she became suddenly terrified the whole strange place would snap out of existence and plunge her back into a life she knew she could no longer bear. She wanted now to run forward, hold his cloak as she had wanted to hold the cloak of the priest, but it was impossible. She tried to speak again, and he stopped her with a raised hand. "Listen," he said, "and try to remember. Do not despise your Church; for she has a wisdom beyond your understanding. Do not despise her mummeries; they have a purpose that will be fulfilled. She struggles as we struggle to understand what will not be understood, to comprehend that which is beyond comprehension. The Will that cannot be ordered, or charted, or measured." He pointed round him, at the circling stones. "The Will that is like these; encompassing, endlessly voyaging, endlessly returning, enfolding the heavens. The flower grows, the flesh corrupts, the sun circles the sky; Balder dies and the Christos, the warriors fight outside their hall Valhalla and fall and bleed and are reborn. All are within the Will, all are ordained. We are within it; our mouths close and open, our bodies move, our voices speak and we are not their masters. The Will is endless; we are its tools. Do not despise your Church. . ."

There was more, but the sense of it was lost in the raving of the wind. She watched the face of the Old One, the moving lips, the strange eyes burning reflecting light from distant suns and other years. "The dream," he said finally, "is ending. If it is a dream. The great Dance finishes, another will begin." He smiled, and touched with his fingers the carved mark above his head.

"Help me," she said suddenly. Begged. "*Please. . .*"

He shook his head, it seemed to her pityingly, watching her as she had watched the glow-worms pulsing their lives out on the grass. "The Sisters spin the yarn," he said, "and mark, and cut. There is no help. It is the Will. . ."

"Tell me," she said. "Please. What will happen to me? You *can* do it, you've got to. You *owe* it. . . ."

His voice droned at her, splitting the wind. "It is forbidden. . . ." His eyes seemed to veil themselves. "Watch from the South," he said. "There will be life for you, coming from the South, and death. As for all creatures born, so for you. There will be joy and hope ; there will be fear and pain. The rest is hidden ; it is the Will. . . ."

She screamed at him. "But that's no good, you haven't told me anything. . . ." It was useless ; man and stones were fading, diminishing, as she herself was whirled back and away. It seemed for an instant the face of the Old One glowed bronze and glorious till she saw the Christos, or Balder in his majesty, staring out of the clouds ; then he blackened, a darker shade among shadows of stones that dwindled to a point and were gone.

"NOW THEREFORE DEPART. THY ABODE IS THE WILDERNESS, THY HABITATION THE SERPENT ; NOW THERE IS NO DELAY . . . FOR BEHOLD THE LORD GOD APPROACHETH QUICKLY, AND HIS FIRE WILL GLOW BEFORE HIM. FOR IF THOU HAST DECEIVED MAN, THOU CANST NOT MOCK THY LORD. . . ."

"HE EXCLUDES THEE, WHO HAST PREPARED FOR THEE AND THY ANGELS EVERLASTING HELL ; OUT OF WHOSE MOUTH THE SHARP SWORD WILL GO, HE WHO SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD AND THE WORLD BY FIRE. . . ."

The thing was finished ; and Anne stared round at the faces of the others and at their hands, and knew. *The room was quiet again.* . . .

She waited watching long after the others had gone, Father Edwardes sitting at the bedside and the nurse, the old man breathing slow, all effort ended. She stood with crossed arms at the window, feeling the night air move on her face, watching out over the house roofs at the blur of the heath and the thin pale line of horizon down to the south. Seeing with the clearness of hallucination Robert flogging his horse and swearing, cursing all women to the

Devil and beyond, riding to fetch her back to his hall. Her lips once nearly quirked into a smile. *For the flower grows, the flesh dies, the sun circles the sky and we are within the Will.* . . . She frowned, puzzling her head, but couldn't remember where she'd heard the words.

Jesse Strange died with the dawn; the Father prayed, and laid the Host on his tongue. And in the harsh light the nurse pulled back the covers and counted the cancers showing like blue fists against the pallor of the old man's skin.

— KEITH ROBERTS

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EDITORIAL—*continued from page 3.*

NEW SCHOOLS OF WRITING. We have seen a good deal of experiment of late with writing technique in sf. This is a good thing. When it fails we know what not to do. When it succeeds we have another tool we can use. Much has been made of William Burroughs, but it has not been pointed out often enough that he has failed. Clarity, conviction and content are hard enough to get across without mixing up your pages at random. Mr. Burroughs has shown us what to avoid. James Ballard has shown us that the classical pulp hero that must be identified with him can instead be done away with. William Golding has done this outside of sf, but it was nice of someone to do it within our own field. Other writers could import the best of the outside world into our little cosmos. This does not mean rushing out to buy the most *avant-garde* novel to transpose into sf. It does mean that sf writers could profit by more catholic reading of fiction in the hope that new techniques might fill them with enthusiasm so that they could cast their ideas in newer forms.

We are not an island unto ourselves, much as some of us would like to be. Mainstream writers who want to write sf should read nothing but sf; sf writers who want to improve their work, make readers happier, make more money, should read everything except sf for a solid year.

— HARRY HARRISON

# THE SUPERSTITION

by Angus McAllister

When McCormick didn't come back from the village neither Morgan nor Anderson were particularly worried at first. Both of them knew how much it had annoyed him as the team's communications expert to have to leave so soon when so little progress had been made towards understanding the intricacies of the native language. It wasn't surprising that McCormick would want to make the most of this last chance to converse with the aliens by prolonging his last visit as long as he could.

Not that there was any longer much point in trying to master the alien language, because there had never been any problem of communication. For a race living in primitive conditions, the Krett had picked up the English language amazingly quickly, and most of them could already speak it fluently. With that stumbling block out of their way, it had not taken the team long to collect all the data necessary for their preliminary survey report. For there was really very little to the planet. A barren rock, scarcely bigger than an asteroid, it would never have interested the Earthmen at all were it not for the few deep crevasses on its surface which had managed to trap enough air to support life.

A simple assignment had been carried out quickly and efficiently. Any missing details could be filled in later by a larger and better equipped expedition if the report of the preliminary team made it seem worthwhile. In the meantime, the team could return to Earth in the knowledge that their job had been done well. If McCormick was dissatisfied, it was only because a challenge had been made to his professional pride and he'd failed to meet it.

Morgan and Anderson had completed their preparations for the take off. All that remained to be done now was to

loosen the ship's anchor cables, and there was little point in setting the ship adrift until McCormick had returned and they were ready to leave.

Morgan pressed himself back in his chair and slipped his thumbs beneath his seat belt to ease the pressure of the buckle on his stomach. In this place it was impossible to get comfortable. It would be good to get back into space where they could always produce some gravitational effect by spinning the ship.

He looked at Anderson who was restlessly swimming about the cabin. "Something worrying you?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Anderson. "I just can't help feeling that this job's been too simple. I'm sure we've missed something important."

This didn't surprise Morgan, for he knew Anderson was a constitutional worrier. If he had no problems, he always managed to think up some. "What's there to miss? What do you want us to do?" Morgan chuckled. "Send out a search party for the Zungribs?"

Native superstitions always amused Morgan, and the Krett belief in gods that snatched people into the sky was one of the best yet. Especially since Anderson seemed to take it so seriously.

"That's one of the things that worries me," said Anderson. "We know how intelligent the Krett are. Not the superstitious type at all." He swung himself into the seat opposite Morgan's and buckled himself down. "Besides, they don't treat these Zungribs in the way that primitives usually treat gods. They never worship them or make sacrifices to them or anything like that. They just mention them casually as if they were some natural hazard." He paused. "In any case, we came from the sky, didn't we?"

"So what?"

"Why didn't they think we were gods?"

"Why should they?"

Anderson shrugged. "Most primitives do."

Morgan laughed. "We didn't conform to their legend of what the Zungribs should look like, that's all. The Krett are the same as any other primitives. They just happen to have a flair for languages." He unbuckled himself from his



seat and swam over to the nearest porthole. "Right now I'm more worried about getting away from this place as soon as we can. If Mac doesn't come back soon, I'm going down to the village to get him."

He could just make out the outlines of the Krett village above the forest of weed-like vegetation that covered the valley floor and swirled into the air uninhibited by the almost nonexistent gravity. He thought he saw a movement from the direction of the village.

"This looks like him now," he said. Then, as the figure drew closer, Morgan saw that it was too slim and lithe to be that of a human being and that it travelled with a grace and speed that the clumsy breast stroke of the Earthmen could not imitate. "No it's not. It's one of the Krett."

Anderson joined him at the porthole. "It's Jarg." He paused, then went on anxiously: "Something must have happened to Mac."

Inventing worries again, thought Morgan. There was probably quite a simple explanation for the native leader's visit.

But, offhand, he couldn't think of one.

With a flick of his tail, the alien leader glided into the ship and came to a stop in the centre of the cabin, hovering motionlessly in front of the Earthmen.

For a moment no one spoke.

Then Anderson said: "Where's McCormick?"

"I have bad news for you." The alien's fish-like features showed no emotion. "Your friend McCormick has been taken by the Zungribs."

The two Earthmen stared at him, speechless. The alien spoke in matter of fact tones as though reporting the occurrence of some everyday accident, and the full significance of what he had said didn't immediately sink in.

"I am very sorry," continued the alien, "but there was nothing we could do to save him."

Morgan didn't know what to think. The situation was so ludicrous that he was completely at a loss for words. Anderson, he could see, was equally taken aback. The alien's face remained as inscrutable as ever. It was in-

possible to know what he was thinking. Morgan forced himself to keep calm.

"Now look here, Jarg," he said. "What's your game? McCormick went down to your village," he looked at his watch, "two hours ago. He should have been back long ago. Where is he?"

"The Zungribs have——"

"I know," interrupted Morgan, "I heard you the first time. The Zungribs or whatever you call them have got him. I suppose," he added sarcastically, "they've dragged him off into the air the way they always do?"

"Yes."

"Well, listen," said Morgan heatedly, "we don't want to hear about your stupid beliefs. We're not ignorant natives. If something's happened to McCormick we want to know what it is."

The alien had no shoulders to shrug, but the effect was the same. "I have told you what happened."

Morgan finally lost his temper. He jumped to his feet, narrowly avoiding cracking his head on the cabin roof. "I don't know what the hell your game is, Jarg, but——"

Anderson said quietly: "I think we'd better go down to the village."

Morgan quietened down. Anderson was right. Questioning the native leader was getting him nowhere. He only got angrier while the alien remained as calm as ever.

But he wished he knew what Jarg was playing at. If McCormick had met with some accident, the alien should be able to tell him what had happened without resorting to this stupid superstition for an answer. On the other hand, if the Krett were responsible for McCormick's failure to return, if this was some hostile move on their part, what was the point of coming to tell the Earthmen about it? Was the alien trying to lead them into a trap?

Neither solution seemed satisfactory. Trap or not, the only way to find out the truth was to go and see for themselves. Morgan swam across the cabin to a locker and brought out two guns. One of them he gave to Anderson, the other he stuck in his belt. The alien watched him, his face as expressionless as ever. There was no way of telling

if he understood what was going on or what the guns were for.

"All right," said Morgan. "Let's go."

All the Krett buildings were small and simple. Without any extremes of climate to contend with, they lived and worked mostly in the open air. It took little more than half an hour for Morgan and Anderson to convince themselves that if McCormick was still in the village, he was pretty well hidden.

Any of the natives who were around paid little or no attention to the Earthmen, but went about their business, neither helping nor hindering them in their search. Jarg followed them around at a distance, saying nothing and watching everything they did. Eventually, having found nothing, they arrived back in the village centre.

"I don't understand it," said Anderson. "Where could Mac have got to?"

"I don't know." Morgan's face was grim. "But they must know and they'd better tell us." He motioned to a passing native. "Do you speak English?"

The alien stopped and swam over to the Earthmen. "Yes."

"Do you know McCormick?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him here a short while ago?"

"Yes."

"What happened to him?"

"The Zungribs——"

"To Hell with the Zungribs!" shouted Morgan. He waved his gun in the alien's face. "Tell me what happened to McCormick."

The alien looked blank. Anderson said: "You say the Zungribs took him?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it happen."

"What's the use?" said Morgan disgustedly. He turned to another native, tried the same routine and got the same answers. Then he tried a third, then a fourth. All bore out

their leader's story. Everyone seemed to have been an eyewitness to the event. The more natives he questioned, the more frustrated he got. Finally he gave up and turned back to Anderson. "What next?" he asked resignedly.

Anderson hesitated. "I've been thinking," he said slowly. Suppose there's something in what they say about the Zungribs."

Morgan stared at him. Had Anderson gone mad?

"Don't get me wrong," the other went on hastily, "I'm not turning superstitious. But maybe there is something up there."

"What could there be?"

"How should I know?" Anderson shrugged. "Some other intelligent life form, obviously."

Morgan snorted. "Living in a vacuum? Don't be stupid. We surveyed the whole surface of this planet before we landed, didn't we? Where were the Zungribs then?"

Anderson sighed. "I don't know," he admitted. "I just can't believe that the Krett could have had anything to do with it. It doesn't make sense."

Morgan could see his point. He found it just as difficult as Anderson to believe that the natives could have been responsible for McCormick's disappearance. They had always been friendly and co-operative from the moment the Earthmen had landed, and until now the team had never had any doubts as to their goodwill. In any case, it was hard to see what they stood to gain.

But there could be no other explanation. It had to be the Krett. Morgan only wished he knew what they were up to.

McCormick was somewhere in the valley: there could be no doubt of that. But how could they go about finding him? To make anything like a thorough search they would need some form of transport, and apart from the ship, which was too big for such low altitude manoeuvres, they had nothing.

"Maybe he just wandered off somewhere and got lost," suggested Anderson. "Maybe," he added hopefully, "he's waiting for us back at the ship."

Morgan didn't answer. Anderson was clutching at a straw and knew it. Both of them realised by this time that

something must have happened to McCormick, though exactly what they had no idea. However, they would have to go back to the ship now in any case. Much as he hated to give up the search, Morgan realised that there was little else they could do. The short period of daylight was almost over and it would soon be dark.

Morgan swam over to the native leader. "We'll have to go back now," he told him, "but we'll be back. If you can't produce McCormick before daylight, we'll tear the whole village apart until we find him."

It was an empty threat. Even with guns, the Earthmen were greatly outnumbered, and if they resorted to violence would probably come off worse. Morgan was only attempting to release some of his pent up frustration, and even this purpose was thwarted by the complete lack of reaction it produced in the alien. He went back to Anderson. "Let's go then," he said wearily.

Reluctantly they made their way back to the ship. As they had expected, McCormick wasn't there.

But they were barely back before one of the natives arrived from the village with the news that McCormick had been found.

McCormick's body floated about three feet from the ground anchored to a small bush by a piece of rope. His left leg was missing. It had been cleanly cut off just below the haunch, and from the severed edge blood oozed out and floated slowly to the ground in large drops. Both Anderson and Morgan had seen the effects of exposure to vacuum on the human body before. The symptoms were entirely unmistakable and far from pleasant.

Morgan turned away to avoid being sick. His mind was in a whirl, still unable fully to take in this new course of events. Until now, he had nourished a faint hope that McCormick might somehow yet turn up alive and well. To have this hope dashed so suddenly and so brutally took a little while to get used to, even for someone so accustomed to the hazards of planetary exploration as he was.

But what was even more difficult to get used to was the inevitable conclusion that the circumstances of McCor-

mick's death had forced him to reach. For it was now established beyond doubt that the Krett could not have been responsible.

A large number of the natives waited close by in silence, hovering motionlessly above the ground. Jarg was at the front. Morgan swam over to him.

"Where did you find him?" he asked.

"Just outside the village, floating about twenty feet up," said the alien. "Two of my people found him just after you left. We sent for you right away."

"Thanks," said Morgan absently.

The native leader said quietly: "You believe in the Zungribs now?"

Morgan glanced once more at McCormick's remains and shuddered. "I don't have much choice, do I?"

The alien didn't answer. Both of them were silent for a moment, then Jarg said: "In a way you are lucky. The Zungribs have never rejected anyone before. It looks as though they are not interested in your people."

If this was meant to console Morgan, it had little effect. His initial shock and revulsion at the fate of McCormick had now been replaced by an overwhelming fear of the unknown, coupled with an urgent desire to escape from this planet as quickly as possible. Now that the impossible had happened, he was forced to take the Krett superstition seriously and it scared him to death.

It was almost dark by now. Morgan went back to Anderson who was still over beside McCormick, staring at the body with horrified disbelief. He put his hand on the other's shoulder. "We'd better go back," he said.

They started on their way. Unable to face the task themselves, they got two of the natives to carry the body back to the ship for them.

They decided that they would take off as soon as it was light. There were forces on this planet that were too large for the remains of a three-man survey team to deal with. The investigation of the Zungribs would have to be left to a later expedition. Meanwhile they would try to get as much sleep as they could before starting on their way.

But already they had left it too late.

They had sat up most of the long night before they were sufficiently overcome with fatigue to be able to sleep. It seemed to Morgan that he had been sleeping for hardly any time at all when he was awakened by the ship being wrenched about as though some giant hand had it in its grasp.

Quickly he unharnessed himself from his bunk, floundered over to a porthole and peered out into the dim morning light. He was just in time to see the last of the anchor cables being pulled from the ground before the ship steadied itself and rose swiftly into the air. Morgan watched stupidly as the ground began to recede from his view.

"Get the airlock!" shouted Anderson.

Morgan snapped out of his trance and dived for the control board, pushing himself off from the cabin wall with his feet. During their stay they had left the airlock door open so that they could conserve their oxygen supply by utilising the planet's atmosphere. Now, as the ship climbed swiftly into the sky, the air was already noticeably thinner.

He overshot and cracked his head against a bulkhead. Cursing and half blinded with pain, he fumbled at the controls. Finally he managed to find the right one, a moment later the outer door of the ship hissed shut and the air pressure within the cabin quickly returned to normal.

Anderson clambered out of his bunk. "Put her into power," he said urgently. "We might be able to break free."

Rubbing his head, Morgan reached for the controls again. Then, glancing out of the nearest porthole, he saw that the ship had now drawn in close to the side of the valley and that the precipice like face slid past only a few yards away. "Too late," he said. "We'd smash ourselves to pieces on the cliff." He laughed wryly. "It looks as though the Zungribs are interested in us after all."

Suddenly the ship began to slow down in its ascent, and moved towards the valley wall. The Earthmen watched helplessly as they rushed towards the rock face and a col-

lision seemed inevitable. Then they saw an opening in the cliff which had been hidden by a clump of vegetation, one of the few that still survived at this altitude. The ship headed straight for it and plunged in.

And now Morgan and Anderson have learned a lot more about the Zungribs. They know that they are a highly intelligent race, that they are giants compared with the Earthmen and the Krett, that they live underground and that they can survive in an extremely thin atmosphere. This much is evident to the Earthmen from their vantage point overlooking what appears to be the main square and the principal shopping centre of one of the Zungrib cities.

They have also learned a great deal directly from the Zungribs, for their captors realise that the Earthmen are intelligent and show them a certain amount of consideration accordingly. This, however, does not give them any qualms about exploiting the Earthmen for their own purposes. After all, they also know that the Krett are intelligent, but in a planet so scarce in natural resources such finer points of ethics as the need to show respect for intelligent life have long since been abandoned in the struggle for survival. Morgan and Anderson are only grateful that it took no more than one human leg to convince the Zungribs that, unlike the Krett, the Earthmen would be of more use to them alive than dead.

In any case, the Earthmen are fairly certain that their Zungrib captors have had no cause to regret their decision. The sight of Anderson and Morgan swimming about in their little tank of air has made them quite a centre of attraction, and their window is continually lined with large Zungrib faces peering in at them with an expression of vacant curiosity that is somehow not so very unfamiliar. The result has been quite a boon in business.

With the co-operation of their captors, Morgan has been passing his time learning the Zungrib language. He finds it every bit as intricate as that of the Krett, but has now progressed far enough to be able to read the sign that is hung outside their shop at frequent intervals.

Roughly translated, it says: "Frying tonight."

— ANGUS MCALLISTER



# CLAY

by Paul Jents

Quietly, unobserved behind her sight-screen, the teacher watched the class playing at random with their thought-forms.

It was the part of her duties which she enjoyed least—even now it gave her a slight guilt-complex. Each time it struck her as an intrusion into the private worlds of an individual—however juvenile.

Did the end justify the means, she wondered. She had majored in ethics during her training. And if not—What had the Principal told her? "Your role is not that of a spy, but of a guardian." And he should know—he used the tele-tale screen enough himself, on the rest of the staff.

As likely as not her own thought-patterns were being recorded at this moment. The Board would hardly be pleased to find her moralizing instead of working.

She turned back to the screen.

Little Vince, now, still on triangles, was he? He had been fascinated by his thought-play triangles for a week now—ever since he had discovered the forms for himself. He was variegating the shapes and sizes much more easily now, she noticed, and colouring them too. They moved over his head, a kaleidoscope string of three-sided bubbles, cannibalising each other as she watched.

Gradually all but two of them faded out, as the infant concentrated his attention upon a gorgeous orange isosceles and a green equilateral. They approached each other, hesitated, engulfed.

True to his previous observations, the resulting shade was a dirty, sickly brown, and the teacher waited for him to fade them out into something more pleasing. Vince's report mentioned a keen sense of colour appreciation.

Instead the mated triangles contracted rapidly to the size of a pin-head, with the billions tint darkening and concen-

trating. He paused, frowning at the increasing ugliness, puzzling it out as the teacher watched. Then he reversed the process, expanding the figure like a blown balloon, so that the colours faded into a not unsatisfying autumn tint.

Only then did he elaborate his thoughts into a further extravagance of triangles.

Definite signs of development there, the teacher noted. Still dealing mainly with two-dimensional objects, but handling aesthetic problems intelligently.

Vince—query experimental art? she scribbled on the pad beside her. Although the triangle-forms indicated a probable trend towards mathematics. Functional art of some kind—that appeared to be the trend. Architecture? She jotted the words down as suggested future lines of study.

Now what about Bea? The teacher turned the screen. How sweet—still playing with her thought-form dolls. She had one in her arms now—a pretty little creature—blonde. No, the other head was brunette, tucked protectively under its quivering wings.

Bea was mothering it tenderly, combing its golden fur—so like her own. Obviously a pupil of limited imagination, but with strongly developed maternal instincts for six years of age. Yes, that had been noted on her report.

The teacher smiled again at the charming scene.

Suddenly she stiffened.

Stealthy, silent, snake-like on its belly, a panther was shadowing its way over the classroom floor. Bea was completely unaware of it, still tending her thought plaything. The panther merged itself into the dappled shade of the desks, its body almost imperceptibly foreshortening as it tensed to spring. Only its tail moved, whipping the air in angry silence.

Still the teacher watched the screen, unwilling to interfere. Unless—

The panther uncoiled and arced towards the doll, seizing it in its jaws, wrenching it away and savaging it upon the floor. Bea shrank back terrified as the stronger thought-form dominated and engulfed her own. At the same time the triangles abruptly disappeared as Vince ran forward,

trying to pull the doll away. His fingers passed unresisting through the phantasmal objects, not of his making.

The teacher noted it professionally, as she hurried from the screen. It was the typical reaction of an unformed mind, instinctively making a physical response to a hostile mental stimulus, instead of countering with the intellect.

She swung open the classroom door, gazing once more upon the bloodstained panther and its victim. Then with dispassionate efficiency she neutralized the thought-form, banishing it from the stream of consciousness to the deep subconscious well of its beginnings.

Suddenly the classroom floor was clean and empty again.

For a moment. Almost at once, with a scream, a roar and a smell of hot oil, a red underground train was bearing down upon her, lit and pig-like eyes glinting, sparks grinding from its wheels. The teacher, full in its path, ignored it completely, gazing sternly at the third child, standing a little apart from the rest.

"Stop it, Iam," she ordered sharply. "Just you stop it at once!"

The train quivered, paled, seemed to grow smaller.

"You hear me?"

Abruptly the train ceased to exist, and Iam's face grew red as he felt her adult will subduing his own, neutralizing his angry thoughts almost before they were born.

The room became very still. Deliberately the teacher let the silence of authority grow.

"That's better," she said at last. "Now, go back to your desks. And don't you let me have to speak to you again," she added to Iam as he shuffled past her, with averted eyes. "We'll have no hostile thought-play here, thank you very much. You're not a baby now, you know."

Tactfully she ignored his minor rebellion. Maybe he had learned his lesson.

But Bea was still shivering, wet-eyed. It was a bad atmosphere for work—something must be done to dispel it. Quickly the teacher turned to the balls of clay, neatly stacked on the cupboard shelves.

"Now, class—you remember what we were doing yesterday? How I showed you what you could model? And the

development? Would you like to do some more? Hands up, those who would."

She chuckled, smiling at their eagerness.

"All right, but this time you can try it all by yourselves. Bea, dear, take some clay yourself and give some to the others, please. That's right, one each. Say thank you, Vince."

Controlled now, and expectant, the pupils sat, fingering the mounds of grey clay, smelling its cold and earthy promise.

"Now, make anything you like, but plan it out properly before you start, like I showed you. Remember, the development's important, too—you get double marks for that. So nothing silly, please."

She drew a pile of exercise books towards her.

"You can start, then. No talking, mind. I'll come round and see what you've done in a little while . . ."

Engrossed in her own work, it was well over an hour before she got down from her desk to inspect their efforts. The youngsters were all absorbed in their own little worlds, now being painstakingly translated into terms of clay.

First she looked over at Vince, noting the delicate precision of his modelling, the exact proportionment of its parts.

"May I see?" She adjusted her spectacles, leaning to examine his work. "Still interested in triangles, aren't you? That's a good little population you've got there—I like the equilaterals. Look at that one moving about—they're the workers, are they? And how do they communicate—talk to each other? They haven't any mouths, so—yes, I see. Their colour changes when they think—that's quite logical, Vince. Except—"

She paused and looked closer.

"There's two of them now—the big one's getting quite angry, isn't he? Red does represent anger, I suppose? Yes. But Vince—how do they detect colour changes in the others? They'd be quite unaware of colour, as such, wouldn't they? They've no organs—oh, I see. They just *feel* the frequencies change with the colours, that's much

simpler. Did you invent that yourself, or did you read it? Anyway, whichever it was, that's a very good effort."

He smiled happily at her praise.

"And you think it's right for them to have emotions, even though they are geometrical figures, do you? Yes, of course they can, if you want them to. After all, it's your little world, isn't it? Now let's have a look at the development stage, shall we?"

Carefully they lifted the clay into the big ageing frame, steadying it as she turned the dial.

"Let's say two million years, that's a nice round figure. You can switch on now, Vince."

They watched as the little globe puckered and contracted under the intense abrasion of the time-furnace, waiting until it had hardened into its age-state. Then they removed it, setting it on the bench as the teacher examined it once more.

"Ye-es, that's very ingenious—I like that. You've developed those triangles well. As they grow older—how old do they live? Yes—as they grow they gradually expand into the third dimension. Cones and pyramids. Why the difference? Oh, the pyramids are male, of course. They propagate, do they? Prop-a-gate—it means breed," she explained. "I see. Two-dimensional babies growing into the third."

As he explained she was marking his report. Five for situation. Seven for execution. And for development?

"What happens when they get really old? Yes, there's one. He's developed nearly into a sphere, hasn't he? If it is a he—it's difficult to tell. They become sexless, don't they—and he's only got a segment missing. And when the sphere is complete? He dies. Mmmm. Into the fourth dimension, as a baby again—and that doesn't concern you, of course, not in this form."

Eight for development. Very logical.

"I think you've done very well, Vince—a pleasant, mathematical little scheme you've got there. Don't throw it away—I'd like to show it to the kindergarten tomorrow."

He flushed with pleasure as he went back to his desk, carrying the clay proudly before him.

"And how are you getting on, dear?" The teacher turned to Bea and her little silver sculpting. "Well, now, isn't that pretty. Just like fairyland—look at all the tinsel you've used. Oh, they are fairies, aren't they?"

She smiled, looking closer at the dainty globe.

"Any men ones? Gnomes. Yes. And the gnomes do all the work, while the fairies just sit and comb their fur. Mmmm. Well, that's how it ought to be, isn't it? It proves it's a feminine world, all right—just like ours."

Bea looked up, puzzled, and the teacher smiled again.

"Never mind, dear, you'll understand when you're grown up. Your world—it's really ever so dainty. I like the cob-web babies. Now—shall we age it? I hope it doesn't fall to pieces."

She turned to the dials.

"It will have to be two million years again—this machine's stuck. I'll send it back to the Maker in the morning. Switch on—mind it doesn't spark at you. Now—what have we got?"

With extreme care the teacher lifted the clay out—it was crumbling already.

"Angels—that's nice. And cherubim—and yes—that's a seraphim, isn't it? Thought so. What's this one, then, dear—the one with the golden trumpet thing? An archangel, of course. You have worked hard, haven't you? What a pity those harps are beginning to tarnish already."

She paused before she spoke again—she didn't want to hurt tender little feelings.

"There's only one thing, Bea. They're not *doing* anything, are they? I mean—apart from singing. Wouldn't you get a bit bored, dear—I mean, if you were there yourself? You think—nothing to look forward to—do you see what I mean?"

Bea looked more puzzled than ever.

"There aren't even any gnomes now, are there? Oh—grown into archangels. Well, it's your world, of course—"

Again she paused. Three for development. All right—four.

"It's a pretty idea, and I think you've taken a lot of trouble with it, but—Go and have a little talk with Vince, dear. See what he's done—his development work is rather good. I can see you've tried, though, and that's the main thing . . ."

Poor little thing—she'd never understand. Still, she was happy—and she'd make a good, old-fashioned cuddle-mummy when she grew up. What more did the Powers want?

"And now you, Iam. Let's see yours. Come along, now." She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Let me have a look, please."

Reluctantly he moved away. She peered. There was nothing wrong with his work. It was a *nice* little world.

"What a lovely lot of greenery—and isn't everything just growing. Full marks for vegetation, Iam—those trees look good enough to eat. Lots of water—the trees need all that, I expect. Look at all that grass, too—and flowers. That big tree by itself—an apple-tree isn't it—in that garden thing, there? Yes. You've taken a lot of trouble over this, I can see."

She glanced down at him quickly. Still sulking—never a smile. What a nasty little—

"Those things there, Iam, what are they? Primates, yes. Not very pretty, but they're really vigorous, aren't they? Don't they move quickly? That beach, there—lovely coral—I wouldn't mind being there myself. And pretty colours. Vince and Bea had lovely colours in their worlds, too."

He was positively scowling, now—jealous, that was the matter with him. Couldn't bear to hear anyone else being praised.

"Masses of fish, too. I don't think I like the reptiles much, though—I think they'll burn out in the aging frame. There's a big one—know the name of him, Iam?"

She pointed.

"Pterodactyl. A long word. I'll write it on the black-board. Put it in your books."

She waited while the class copied it laboriously, and then turned back to the clay.

"Now let's age it, Iam. Lift it in yourself. Good. Got to be two million years, you know, like the rest."

The teacher watched closely as he switched on, seeing the ball crack and groove, the greenery patching out.

"There. I'd better take it—it seems a bit fragile. Careful. That's got it. Now let's have a proper look at the development."

She leaned closer to the crinkled little globe on the bench.

"Not quite as pretty as it was but—it's simply swarming, isn't it? No more of those big reptiles. But look at those nasty little things scurrying about, there. Simply masses of—"

She paused as something stung her hand, nearly jerking the clay from its support.

"What was *that*? That mushroom thing did it—my hand's quite sore. What was it? Nuclear? Nuclear?"

She glared at him.

"What have you been doing, Iam? You just come up to the desk with me."

Holding the globe as if it was something unclean, the teacher marched towards the dais, with the reluctant Iam dragging behind her. She set the clay on her desk and opened the drawer, dabbing antiseptic onto her palm, and fastidiously wiping her soiled fingers on a towel.

Then she fumbled for a magnifying-glass and for a long, steel needle that she used as a probe.

"What's this—and this?" She prodded with dainty repulsion. "Of course you know what I mean. Look—there are whole colonies of them—swarming, breeding, fighting each other. Horrible!"

She shivered as the needle continued to prod at the unsavoury mess and the earth shook and quaked.

"White ones, yellow ones, black ones—beastly, ugly little things! See how they run! Germs—diseased, dirty germs!"

She wrinkled her nose in distaste, feeling the fur rise at the back of her neck at the uncleanness in front of her. Hastily she covered it with the towel.

"And you—you've spoilt that beautiful, green world you made with a horrible development like that?" Iam's sullen



face began to pale at her fury. "And you dared—you *dared* to show it to me!"

Angrily she slapped the back of his knees. "I ought to take you straight up to the Principal!"

She slapped again, and Iam began to cry.

"Take it away—that disgusting world of yours!" She pointed. "No—don't touch it with your hands—use the cloth. Drop it in the waste-paper-basket—that's right."

She ground her heel upon the clay, pounding it into dust.

"That's going straight into the fire. And as for you—"

She rounded on Iam, still trembling by her side.

"You go and stand in the corner until you're sorry! And just you make sure you do better next time!"

A parting slap sped him, howling, on his way.

"Oh, you naughty, *naughty* little god!"

— PAUL JENTS

# SYNOPSIS

by George Hay

## NEW READERS START HERE.

There are just fifteen seconds to go.

Her retro-rockets damped, her console wrecked, the TSS LUSTRA plunges helplessly towards an unsuspecting New York. Staring at the shattered controls sits TERRY SPANNER, Captain of the ship and undercover operative for the Inner Planets Council. His gaze is calm and reflective, to the astonishment and chagrin of

AARGH PARR, former U.C.L. classmate of TERRY, now a traitor to the Inner Planets and serving the sinister aims of the Outer Planets Federation. He is able to observe TERRY through the hi-spy unit he left—concealed in a lucky charm—on top of the console, when he blasted off from the LUSTRA a few minutes earlier in its tiny scout, having treacherously hit TERRY from behind with a blunt instrument, wrecked the instruments beyond repair, and sent the ship hurtling earthwards. He had taken care to stun his enemy only lightly, for, sadist that he is, he wishes to savour to the full the thrill of watching his reactions in the face of inevitable death.

And not death only! There is also FAILURE in his mission, for, before leaving, AARGH has taken 3-D photos of the strange mechanism that bulks heavy in the LUSTRA's hold. This mechanism is the

TIMEWARPER that TERRY has borrowed from the all-wise and benevolent

ALLYSTRA, strange insectile race inhabiting the lost planet of DIS, circling far beyond Pluto, and only now located by TERRY in the desperate search for a weapon to counter the O.P.F. menace.

With the plans of the machine in his hands, AARGH is certain of getting a cool million credits from his masters. He would have taken the machine itself from the ship, but

for the fact that there is room on the scout only for himself and

SANDY SAL, TERRY's flame-haired fiancée, whom AARGH has despicably rendered unconscious by putting dope into her reefers while her attention was distracted by his collection of dirty photos. AARGH thinks it a pity that TERRY will not live to learn of SANDY's rape, which will commence in fifteen and some micro-seconds' time, the moment after the LUSTRA has blown herself and New York to atoms. At the moment, he is puzzling over TERRY's calm expression in the face of imminent death, failure, and fiancée-rape.

Little does he realise that TERRY's attention is entirely taken up with an interesting philosophical problem, to wit, as follows:

KOO, the all-wise leader of the ALLYSTRA, has explained earlier to our hero that the aggressive designs of the OPF are the work of one man, a Jovian,

KARK KURR, an enigmatic mutant, of whose antecedents nothing is known prior to his manifestation at the age of twenty-five. By the time he was thirty-seven, KURR had welded all the Outer Planets into one vast military dagger aimed at Earth and her confederates. KOO has revealed to TERRY that KURR is really the product of a parallel time-stream. He is in fact the hell-spawn of the rape of SANDY by AARGH. The explanation of his manifestation in time *before* the rape lies in the peculiar combination of the atomic blast caused by the explosion of the LUSTRA's pile in New York, and the effects of it on the TIMEWARTER she is carrying.

AARGH thinks himself well out of reach of the explosion. He wots not, however, that, wrenched by the TIMEWARTER, one small packet of IM (Instant Mutation) particles, travelling in their own warfield, will strike at the helpless SANDY, hurling her into the alternate world, one moving at an infinitely slower pace than her own. To SANDY, nothing will seem to have happened (apart from the rape, *bien entendu*). In fact, she will have produced and nurtured a child on the time-parallel planet, and gone on to die at a ripe old age, full of wisdom and Turkish

Delight. At the age of twenty-five, her son, KURR, possessed by the demoniac rage of his engendering, and by a seething sub-conscious hatred of the planet that has—via the atomic blast of the LUSTRA—"rejected" him, will move to Jupiter, using the last stored-up energies of the warfield. There, he will embark on his fiendish plans.

Up till a short while ago, there was available to TERRY a simple solution to all these problems. He had only to adjust the TIMEWARPER to the moment before AARGH boarded the ship, and—this time prepared—overcome the dastard on his appearance.

Unfortunately, in photographing the machine, AARGH has thrown its settings into confusion. These settings being delicate, it will take TERRY a full two minutes to adjust them to the position he needs. Yet he has only fifteen seconds left before he plunges to his doom!

He can, of course, take a chance and actuate the machine on its current setting. Certainly, that will remove himself and his craft from the imminent danger. But where and when will he emerge? He may materialise as a super-brain in the remote future—or as a cell in the gut of some Chicago gunsels of the 1920's. Or as one of Napoleon's slaughtered Old Guard at Waterloo. Or as Hitler's moustache.

*Que faire?* The possibilities seem infinite. No wonder our hero is engrossed! No wonder that AARGH is puzzled!

What will TERRY decide? Will his devotion to Old Earth rise superior to his fear of a lifetime as Hitler's moustache? What will happen now?

*There are just fifteen seconds to go.*

NOW READ ON.

—GEORGE HAY

# A VISITATION OF GHOSTS

by R. W. Mackelworth

"It's happening again!"

Boraston tried to tear his eyes away from the drawing on his desk. His eyes had a will of their own. They were rooted to the sketch he had just picked out from the rest of the class work.

He was terrified.

The sketch was of the same intricate monogram he had drawn so often before but which he never remembered drawing. If he allowed his gaze to follow the weaving line he would find the . . .

He stood up suddenly. Falteringly, he made his way to the window, that overlooked the bumpy, part worn turf of the playing field, and flung it wide open. Looking down, he wondered if he dare be sick on the flower beds below.

With whimpering fortitude he battened down the high, rising tide of bile and despair, gulping in great gobs of air, which in no way satisfied his lungs, until his whole being trembled on the brink of tortured breakdown.

It was the sound of the headmaster's motor mower that saved him. Briggs, the gardener, was near at hand, round the corner of the building, and Boraston hated him. The gardener's shrewd, piggy eyes would be everywhere, dodging like sharp biting insects into every secret nook and cranny.

Boraston suspected he even knew his secret.

His hate held his hysteria in check. His big body began to relax, like an iceberg melting into a warm sea of loathing, until it was no longer screaming for help.

Nothing was changed. Sooner or later he would have to look at the drawing again otherwise the tension would return and build up into an all-consuming hunger. He would see the monogram in his mind and follow its de-

manding lines like a flame-tempted moth. The drawing was a perception, a premonition which warned him of things to come, and it was only the first part of an inevitable process.

Nevertheless, he calmed himself enough to savour his hate for Briggs, for the headmaster, the headmaster's wife, and the whole school. Briggs was full of gardener's malice, a wicked man. The headmaster was a sly, political sort, a fat fraud. His wife cared only for her flowers and the good-looking boys in the sixth, who didn't care a damn for her since it was a mixed school. The school itself was a half-cocked brain factory with no tradition apart from an obsession with useless experiment.

Boraston slammed the window shut.

Outside, he could hear Briggs cursing. The mower had broken down. Briggs was swearing at the mower, the flowers, and at the kids because they had it in for him and without them he would be out of a job and they knew it. Boraston had that much in common with Briggs. If one of them had confessed to giving him the evil eye he would have believed the child instantly. They were demons, vile, little beasts, on whom he depended too. That was the rub. He depended on them and they didn't care a cuss about him or his problem.

Rather than return to his desk he propped his broad backside on the top of one of the children's desks and wondered if they did sense the truth about him. Not that many of them had much intelligence. It was their sixth sense for other people's weakness that was their strength, their crude love of conflict.

He knew he was trying to think himself out of looking at the drawing. He realised that would only work for a time. Soon, he would have to look again.

He would look deep and long.

He would look until he saw the face.

A sharp point jabbed him and he fumbled behind him urgently. It was a grubby, brown pencil. Someone had chewed around the top with sharp, ratlike teeth. The pencil belonged to a boy called Yates and Boraston noted the deep gashes ringed around the pencil, thinking about the bites which had worked their way about it passionately,

and the boy. "Yates doesn't like me," he remarked bitterly, "he doesn't care a damn what happens to me."

He stared moodily at the poster pinned to the top of the blackboard. It was a cheap reproduction of the Venus de Milo. It advertised a holiday in the Greek Islands for all those whose turn of mind was intellectual and yet found a package tour agreeable. He had begged the poster from a levantine travel agent with whom he had a mutually profitable arrangement for school holidays abroad; a small commission for each child who took a month's grand tour.

Boraston had hoped the children would appreciate the perfection of the classical form and fall for the idea of the tour. He had never been to Greece.

Their appreciation took a predictable line.

A few of their drawings had been lasciviously crude. The rest were inept but striving to be lasciviously crude. Many were unsigned but had new captions. All the captions had the same boringly simple play on words about no hands. Boraston was ashamed. He had made up his mind only to keep one of two of the best—until he came across the extra sketch. That drove all thought of their amusing wickedness out of his mind.

The sketch was beautifully executed. In every line there was simplicity. Every curve made the perspectives as pure in spirit as the sculpture represented on the poster but the result was strangely elaborate. It was a work of genius. That, Boraston found even stranger because he knew he had drawn it himself though normally he couldn't draw the simplest subject.

Time after time he had attempted to understand the meaning of the drawing itself, thinking that solving the riddle would cure his affliction. He only confused his brain and always finished with the haunting glimpse of the woman's face; the face at the end of the maze, a face which was far more mysterious than the monogram. The woman had a look which no words could describe. The look was part of an emotion, the visible indication, and was far beyond the scope of his experience, neither sad nor

glad, hard or soft, but somehow wise and naïve at the same time.

He learned nothing from the face.

Yet, it had a meaning. Every time he saw it he knew it had a meaning and what was to follow should have provided his answer. He longed for the fulfilment of knowing. All it had ever done was to frighten him.

There was no denial. He had to look again. He had to see if she had changed her expression. He had to endure the fainting fall into the other existence once more just in case, this time, there was some explanation.

Boraston returned to his own desk, very slowly, glancing about him to see if anyone was watching and secretly laughing.

"Damn it, I must look. Sooner or later I'll have the answer. It can't beat me every time!" He hated to hear himself muttering because half the staff were mad and liked to think the sane were as mad as themselves. Plenty of them would like his history sinecure and would tell on him to the headmaster, who was scared stiff of deviations since the art master turned out to be queer. All the same, Boraston knew he had always muttered to himself when he was scared. It was as natural to him as indigestion after a school meal. It was a pity. He was a huge man and nothing should have frightened him.

One problem absorbed him. How long would it be before the other business started? After the drawing, the woman's face, and after her what course would the experience take?

It was worse since he joined the school. There was something about the place that encouraged eccentricity. Before he became a master there, all the attacks had been short, blurred affairs, incomplete visions that could be blamed on drink, or nerves, or some kind of *petit mal*. Apart from one or two perhaps. When he came to the school the visions had been clearer and more purposeful. It was as if the place was fruitful and right, as a cemetery was right for ghosts. No one ever saw a ghost in a launderette or a public convenience. For some reason the school had the right atmosphere.



Once, he had tried to tell Klaus, the science master. Klaus had been strangely offended. He was halfway round the twist himself and he thought Boraston was hinting at it. They had parted in mutual suspicion.

Boraston had a feeling his flashes of insight, visions, whatever they were, owed nothing to him, on the subjective sense. It was as if someone used him and took him over for their own purpose, especially during the course of the vision itself, when he was projected into another time. The first attacks had been confused shades of awareness; strange smells that hung in the air disembodied, sounds and sights without meaning. Then they had become progressive. They began to have a cohesion and he felt it had become dangerous.

He gave up all his vices but one.

That didn't cure him so he took them all up again. For a while, oddly, he was actually free of visions and he congratulated himself on a cheap victory.

Then, came a swift series of attacks.

For the first time he felt he was in the same reality as his experience, yet the experience had its roots in the place where he had been when it caught him. When it came in class he saw the faces of the children flow and ebb like a human tide and, for a brief moment, they had been different children. Once, looking through the window, he had seen Briggs with a new mower and he had seen him fall, either dead or drunk, across it like a shabby, canvas bag. He had hinted at this prophecy to Briggs, with whispered asides and knowing winks, until the gardener was constantly looking over his shoulder for him, not understanding but scared all the same.

Again, he had found himself in the classroom one day but the classroom had changed. The desks were gone and in their place were lumps of electronic gadgetry, black and silver with dials and glass eyes all over them. There were screens for television or film where the blackboard had been. Nowhere was there a child to be seen.

There was a woman. Not the woman.

She had screamed.

He had snickered at her because he was afraid. It worked. She fainted and lay on the floor, spread out like a swatted fly in her bright, clean overalls. He stared down at her and decided he didn't like her face and its light, downy moustache.

She mumbled to herself and he bent down.

She was saying: "I've seen the ghost. It still has nothing on."

He discovered his own nakedness.

"What do you want? A bloody winding sheet?"

The vision ended.

The very last vision had been the clearest.

The woman's black hair and pale beauty, silently expressing her intense quality of emotion, had floated before him, as he drove himself in his old car back to his digs. He stopped at once and ran into the shelter of a small wood nearby.

This time it was very different.

The vision came to him as soon as he had reached the trees. It was suddenly black and cold. The trees about him were stripped of their leaves in a second but no leaf had blown away on the wind. Boraston felt, instinctively, he was watching something very terrible but he could do nothing but watch.

Far away there was a glowing light. It put the bare branches into black relief, grim and stark like wood floating in water. The fire reminded Boraston of the fires he had seen in London during the war when he had sat with his mother and had listened to the bombs falling a long way off, as if they were in another world. She was crying, he remembered, because the postman had brought her a telegram. He had brought it himself because he knew them well and didn't want to leave it to the telegraph boy.

That had been a big event in Boraston's life. It had hurt. What he saw from the wood could have been bigger, more hurtful. There was a different look about the light. It grew and subsided like a breathing animal. Yet, it didn't worry him at all. It ended quickly and he saw nobody. On the branch of a tree there was a bird but it was dead and transfixed, apparently.

Now, was the time he had feared, the next vision. He prepared himself, as an epileptic might prepare himself, for the intense activity to come. He bit hard on a tight wad of handkerchief so he wouldn't cry out.

The first distortion of sight made im panicky.

He fought the panic, pushed his body back into the chair, and crossed his arms across his chest like cold pokers, stiff and straight. He was ready for the next preliminary as an iron oak would be ready for the storm. The whirling pattern of the monogram urged his whole attention but all the same he saw the greying, bunned hair of Miss Lucy Shaw pass the small window in the brown, drab stained door. She was striding down the corridor, haughty, lofty, sharp and spiteful, heading for the hall where they fed the children, with Miss Pat Lamb, her obedient friend, just behind her.

He sighed: "Old red brick . . . musty smell of old spinsters, disinfected classrooms, children's sweat and tears. What the hell am I afraid of?" It helped to quell his fears, to hear his own voice. It always had.

Nevertheless fear came again. The seconds slipped by, each one a tick on the classroom clock like a heavy, lead shot. He could smell his fear. He could smell it even above the sweetness of the green life blood of the slaughtered grass in the field outside or the tangy odour of children inside, not long released from their prison. His own fear smelt acid and choking. It caught in his nostrils and made water come to his eyes.

"Thank God, those women didn't come in here to find me in this state." Boraston had an intense fear of ridicule. What was happening to him was as disgusting as one of the illnesses people were horrified about but laughed at all the same. Also, he had no idea what did happen to his body when he shot forward in time. Did it vanish? Or did it retain its shape and substance and remain there as bare, bleak clay? If some good soul thought he was dead they might bury him, to say nothing of arranging an autopsy.

Suddenly, it was very cold.

The classroom faded away. The girl's face rose before

his eyes, still mysterious and lonely with its mystery. It came and went like a cloud in a dark sky. The darkness became as impenetrable as a thick fog, heavy and clinging and Boraston, like the girl, was alone.

He felt a sob rise in his throat. He was blind and desolate like a man left standing on a desolate pavement in a deserted city with all other humanity fled away.

Boraston felt abandoned.

Gradually light filtered in. The light was silent too. He blinked apprehensively. Cold air blew on his bare body and he shivered. The formless light altered and he saw objects which made sense.

It was the classroom. It was dead and dingy. The brick walls had, at one time, been covered with plastic, but the plastic had peeled away and hung down to the floor like red skin. Underneath he could see the brick he remembered. A few pieces of machinery, the gadgets he had seen before, lay toppled and broken about the room and everything was thick with dust.

Above him, he saw the bare bones of the roof supports bent inwards like crooked knees or thrust apart like wide, appealing arms. The early evening sky was dark with cloud and he could see them scudding by, through the great gaps where the tiles and lining of the roof had been.

"That was very clever."

Boraston swivelled his head urgently. The voice had spoken from his right: where the door had once been and where, now, only a broken panel half filled its space. A tall figure leaned against the further wall, across the corridor. It was a ragged figure which lounged with apparent insolence. Rags hung from the broad shoulders in shreds of red and blue as if they were the remnants of a fancy dancer's dress.

"I nearly shot you in the gut."

Boraston was surprised to find he didn't care. His nudity worried him more. He dropped his hands and stared angrily into the curious face. "Who the hell are you?"

"Damn that, I was here first, who are you?"

Boraston noticed the face possessed a precocious youth-

fulness but he also noticed it was a hard face. It was what was often called "the best kind of hardness" the noble quality which permitted a man to shoot, maim or do another down only if it was absolutely necessary for his own comfort. He had seen the look before and admired it discreetly. "I'm Boraston."

The gun lowered its fat muzzle. "I'm Roget." His stare was still drawn to Boraston's nakedness. "How did you get in here?"

Boraston nodded stiffly at the window.

Roget was matter of fact. "It's shut."

"I'm quick."

He laughed at that and his laugh was like a young man's laugh though his eyes were very old.

"You aren't one of them, anyway." He sounded friendlier.

"One of whom?" Boraston enquired suspiciously.

"The enemy." Roget pointed his gun at the floor as if he wanted to underline his trust. "They have no sense of humour."

"They never do." Boraston couldn't keep irritation out of his voice because he was very cold. He gazed on the tall man's clothes with envy. The school had always been draughty, even in its prime, but now it was freezing. "I want something to wear."

"Why did you come like that?" There was a leer in Roget's tone that threatened to become a lewd laugh.

Boraston smiled blankly as if he too thought it a raw joke. "I lost them on the way."

Roget looked puzzled but seemed prepared to take it as the truth. "He will give you clothes."

"Who?"

"Crundall. He will give you some odds and ends but he will ask you questions too and if he doesn't like you he will take away the clothes and kill you."

"What questions?"

"Such as what sector you come from."

Boraston shrugged his wide shoulders. He could see no point in lying. On the other hand he couldn't see what the truth would be worth since it was unbelievable.

"Are you an outsider?"

The question was obviously colloquial. It trembled between them like a trap to be sprung. "I was always an outsider, Roget, otherwise I wouldn't be here with nothing on."

"An outsider would have to cross the high radiation areas. You had better see Crundall. He will know the truth when he hears it."

Roget stepped forward into the light, the false brightness of twilight showing Boraston every detail of his face and figure.

He tried to suppress his gasp.

The gun swung up again. Suspicion and reproach appeared on his face, ugly and threatening, more so because of the odd angle of his neck, which forced his head back. The shadows in the corridor had lent the face a normality which the light betrayed. "You were shocked! Why were you shocked? Everyone knows about us, even an outsider." The cruel voice had a hint of pathos in it as if underneath something was crying.

Boraston took a grip on himself. It was hard to remain calm with the gun muzzle pointing at his bare stomach and Roget's oddity was now very apparent.

"You can't expect me to know the details," he muttered softly feeling almost sorry for the young creature.

He sensed Roget's decision.

The gun clicked.

Boraston was rolling over onto his side, horribly aware of his unprotected body and wishing for the useless protection of good cloth.

A blinding flash tore a hole in the wall between him and the corridor. It was a living, weaving light which explored the room like a finger without joints, marking the brick with black lines, squiggling over the wall's uneven surface, like a writhing worm.

Boraston could see its touch was fatal.

There was a neat hole in Roget's forehead which had emerged, just as neatly, through the back of his head. For a moment he stood, his head still tilted backwards on its strange neck, then he crumpled over one of the pieces of

machinery and hung there like an abandoned bolster. One of his feet was a few inches from Boraston's face, jutting towards him, at the end of a leg that was bent in the kneeling position. The foot was bare.

Boraston counted the seconds as the light wove its pattern about the room and stared at the foot. It had no toes. Finally, the light snapped off and he could no longer see the foot with no toes. He felt better for that.

He found himself, instead, strangely disinterested.

He was plainly in the middle of strife. His instinct was to ignore it. The experience was more than a dream but he felt, as a dreamer might feel, that a wish could alter the sequence of events and he would awake to sanity. In any case, he had discovered a remarkable fact about himself—he felt heroic, as if he was invulnerable in a land of puny shadows.

He crawled round the piece of electronic junk from which Roget hung. Even in death, Roget had the same hard quality about his face but Boraston no longer envied him anything but his clothes.

"You won't miss these, will you?"

He carefully stripped the body.

The clothes were tight but he didn't care. If someone else started the ritual of question and answer he was at least decent. As an afterthought he took the gun as well.

He knew nothing about guns. He wished he knew as much as Klaus. Klaus liked guns. He liked all weapons of destruction because he was a pacifist. His theory was that peace had to be enforced and he was prepared for the day the men of peace blew the heads off the war-mongers. Boraston knew he had hidden a supply of home-made hand grenades under the floor of the laboratory so that he could arm the senior science class and do his bit.

Boraston wondered if the bombs were still there. It seemed to him they would be easier to handle than the gun and he decided to look for them.

On hands and knees he crawled towards the door.

Roget's jacket and trousers restricted his movements but they seemed to exude a warmth of their own and he felt much better. Looking down at them he discerned a soft

glow which just illuminated the floor beneath his belly. It was the same corridor he had watched Miss Shaw walk along minutes before. If he was returned, there and then, he would be scampering along behind her like a dog. The thought made him giggle.

Turning a corner, he passed stairs which had collapsed. He decided to go to the main flight which was beyond the headmaster's room. The sight of the room changed his mind. The Headmaster's room was no longer a sanctuary, where he could stay and work out his next move.

The room was no longer cosy and safe.

Where it had been was a hole in the outside wall and a few jagged lumps of masonry. There was no furniture. Thick dust covered the floor, except where a heavy object had dragged itself across it to the hole in the wall, leaving a wide track in the dust.

Boraston followed the track hugging the floor close with his whole body, and looked out into the gathering darkness. It was a black tangle of trees and bushes which took his eye, wilder and rougher than the foliage that had neatly lined the school field before. Over them the dark bulk of the town loomed. Once it had pressed smokily up to the very edge of the field but now, although the town hall tower was still there, he could see its shape as a jagged tooth among other rotten teeth clinging to a broken jaw. The outline of the town was torn and serrated.

He knew it wasn't just decay. The town had been smashed by violence and it remained, as crumbling and silent proof of a ruthless process.

"Must have been the fire I saw from the wood."

"Fire and more besides."

For a moment Boraston froze where he was. Curiosity obliged him to turn his head towards a voice that came unattached to a body. He wasn't afraid but he was careful. The voice belonged to an older man and it was more compliant. Boraston felt it was safe to like it. Its owner wasn't as strong as he.

"I'm Boraston."

"Ah, that is a new name." The voice was warm, cosy, almost too cosy. "A new name in this sector."



Boraston stared into the shadows.

"Why not come out into the light?"

The man laughed gently. It wasn't like Roget's laugh. It was much more subtle and dangerous. "Not while you have the gun, Boraston. If you stay in the light, you will be dead in a minute or two, in any case."

Boraston went flat on his belly.

The sweat stood up like small beads on his forehead and trickled down his face. He could see the last of the light fading away outside and feared what it hid. "What's going on?"

"Where were you when it happened?"

"Does it matter?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

Boraston heard him moving. It was like a heavy sack being dragged across the floor. The sound was disturbing. Presently, the man stopped still in the shadow. "I can see you quite well now." There was a patient satisfaction in his voice. "What did you tell Roget?"

"He thought I was an outsider."

"Oh? What then?"

"I think he was going to kill me. Fortunately someone killed him first and that terminated our discussion." Boraston peered at the man's outline which had become visible among the shadows.

A dark blob, which could have been a head, moved. "You took his clothes."

Boraston gingerly raised his body onto his hands and knees and shifted a little nearer to the man. He could see the whole of the man's body. The body was a hunched ball, squatting with the knees drawn up and the head resting on hands that were entwined over the knees. The man looked old, infinitely old.

He hadn't missed Boraston's inspection. There was a loud click and the fat muzzled gun he held shifted to cover the big man, with unwavering devotion.

Boraston waved a casual hand at the gun. "Put that away. I'm no good with a gun myself so there is no risk I will shoot you with Roget's."

The face came closer to him. It was lined and long jawed and once it had been handsome perhaps, in a reflective way. Boraston recognised the look of a man who lived in his head rather than his body.

"My name is Crundall."

Boraston really felt grateful it was Crundall. Roget had had faith in him. "Glad to know you, Crundall."

Crundall humped forward again and Boraston knew he was merely crippled and not deformed like Roget.

"What happened here?" He pointed at the hole in the wall. "I mean the town."

"Never mind about that, Boraston. I want to know why you are here at all. The others will kill you if they can."

Boraston sighed. "There was nowhere else to go."

"Are you mocking me?"

"No, why?"

"You must have crossed the radiation barrier to get here." The wistfulness in Crundall's voice had the quality of deep sadness. "Only someone very special could cross the barrier and someone special wouldn't bother to come here without good reason."

Boraston said nothing.

He felt Crundall's hand grip his arm fiercely.

"If you are from the outside then they have proofed you against radiation. I know you have to be careful what you tell me but I have kept order here. A few of the children are uncontaminated. You could help them, even if you can't help the rest of us."

Boraston still said nothing.

"I'll get you out of here alive if you will do me a favour . . . not much of a favour. Not a favour that would cost you much."

"What favour?"

"Take the children out."

"Out where?" Boraston felt ridiculous. He wanted to giggle.

Crundall muttered to himself. His grip tightened on Boraston's arm. "Come down to the basement. Choose the ones you want, yourself."

"How the hell can I help them if you can't?"

"Take them out."

"How?"

"The same way you got in."

Boraston saw there was no way he could convince the old man. He might just as well humour him until he was pulled back into his own time. There was time to spare some pity even in a place destroyed by God knows what.

"All right. Let's see them."

The man shifted away with a crab-like movement. It was obvious his legs were broken and hadn't been properly set. They were crooked and useless.

"Follow me."

It was dark in the basement. Crundall humped his body across the floor on his hands somehow holding his gun to his lap. He reached a door and pushed it open.

"There!"

The room was dimly lit by what looked like a tiny candle on a bare table. Round the table were a dozen children drawn, as if for safety, to the pool of light.

Six of them looked normal enough, rather ordinary.

Another five were extraordinary because of their deformity in limb and body.

One, taller than the others was different for another reason. Even in the dim light Boraston could see the white face with its pile of glowing black hair reflecting the candle light, a face that belonged to a waif full of uncomplaining, deprived innocence. Her skin shone whitely as though it had been shot with silver.

The girl was so like the girl he had seen . . .

It wasn't exactly the same face but it was a face of unearthly beauty and just to look at it took his breath away. He knew he had to do something for her. If he did it would have to include the others too. They all had something none of the children in his own class possessed—dependence and trust.

Crundall said: "There are compensations." He nodded up at the girl. "Take her at least."

Boraston shook his head. "I'll take them all."

## TWO

It could have been someone singing.

Boraston hesitated in the darkness. He tried to see into a blackness which had the texture of a heavy, dark cloth.

The sound was simple. It was sadly appealing, and echoing fearfully about the intense stillness as if it was a tiny entity seeking out ears to hear it. Woven into the sound was a slight impression of melody.

Crundall hadn't told him to expect it. Crundall hadn't told him to expect anything. Swiftly, he had collected together the children and shepherded them round their new protector without a word of explanation to any one of them. It was as if the children knew his decision and the little time he had to implement it.

Boraston tried to argue with him. Now it was in earnest he regretted his impulse to take all the children away. He had no idea where he was supposed to take them or why.

Standing on the very edge of the radiation belt his doubts haunted him like big ghosts with no names. Behind him, fingers of light struck at the sky like knives striking at black silk, and he wondered if Crundall's people were faring well in the diversion Crundall had arranged for them: an attack on the centre sector, whatever the centre sector was.

The distant sound of singing surged back again and then went, like a shadow of a sound into the cold, still silence. It lingered in his mind all the same and worried him.

"What is that, Maria?"

The girl moved at his side. Her thin body was a part of the constant pressure at his hands and legs. Every child had made a place for itself near him where they could touch him gently so contact was never lost with him in the darkness.

"From the radiation belt, Boraston."

"People?" He waited for her answer hoping she would not confirm his fears and wondering if he had ever heard a voice like hers; inherently childlike and dependant.

"It may be people."

"Haven't you heard the sound before?"

She didn't answer him but he knew she had heard the

sound before. If only Crundall had told him what the radiation belt was and what lay beyond it. For some reason he had refused to reply when Boraston had asked him. He only said: "Your real danger is from the deep pools of radiation. The power is concentrated in some places."

He gave him a small box which turned out to be some kind of geiger counter. "Look after that, it's the last one."

Boraston spent half an hour searching for Klaus's horde of home-made bombs, under the floor boards of the one-time laboratory. There was nothing to be found of them but there were the ancient marks of an explosion which had happened long ago and had been patched up.

"Bloody fool!" Boraston said very softly.

When he returned to Crundall he made another attempt to dodge his task. "I would rather stay here, Crundall, and take my chances."

The fat gun was pushed at his gut. It prodded him spitefully. "You only have one chance. Get out or I'll kill you. If you don't go, the rest take pleasure in killing strangers, especially if they see you are normal."

"Roget wasn't unfriendly . . . at first."

"Roget was exceptionally fair minded but all the same he would have killed you." The old man's face floated, long and disembodied, a few feet from the ground. "He was going to kill you and if I hadn't seen him from the hole in the wall you would be dead by now."

Boraston stared at him. "You shot Roget?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I saw you clearly in the light for a second." His voice was almost a whisper. "I thought you were from the outside."

Boraston said nothing.

He said nothing but he wondered. He wondered about the kind of man who shot a friend to save a stranger just on the off chance he was special, a stranger who he must now know, was not what he had expected.

Crundall seemed to understand what Boraston was thinking. "I don't know where you've come from, Boraston,

since you don't know anything about what happened to us. You know nothing, you seem to be nothing but whatever you are I have to trust you with the children. That should be enough for you."

Boraston felt the children had some deeper significance than mere recipients of fatherly love. They were a talisman of some sort. He wanted to ask more questions but time had run out.

Somewhere, outside the school, voices called urgently in the darkness, hard threatening voice babbling speech with no word very clear.

"You must go—now!"

Crundall pushed him forward.

"What about the parents of these children?"

"Damn you, Boraston, they have no parents. Don't you understand a thing? These children are a burden here, nothing more. Now, go before I shoot you myself."

Boraston went and the children with him.

They stumbled down the ruined stairs, which were the only access left to the building and were once the way to the headmaster's garden, and then along the edge of the wild place that was once the playing field . . .

A child cried softly.

Boraston felt about him at the small hands that clung to his legs and arms but he couldn't tell which child it was. "Maria, hold onto the one who is crying. There is nothing to be afraid of."

"Yes."

The crying stopped.

"We have got to move forward."

Maria replied for all of them. "We are ready, Boraston." Her voice was calm and trusting.

He shut his eyes and opened them again. It was just possible to see the shape of the trees extending to the left and the right but ending there in a straight line, as if beyond was an undefined barrier. In front of the line of trees was a flat, untenanted ground where nothing grew at all.

He stepped forward.

They walked along, a clinging group, with very little idea

even of the direction they were heading. Only the soft wind that blew in their faces gave Boraston any clue to direction. Crundall said that it blew from the east and that was the way they were to go.

The small box in Boraston's hand started to click, slowly at first and finally very rapidly.

He shifted his direction a little and the clicks slowed down. They made another hundred yards and he stopped again.

"Can you see anything, Maria?"

"I can see a building."

He was immensely relieved. The veil of darkness had been terrifying. Even in the daylight Boraston had noticed that the quality of the sunlight had been odd. His eyes had not been able to cope with it easily and what light there was in the night was useless to him now. Maria, though, could see.

"Take us to the house."

The house was only four walls. The roof had fallen inwards as if a giant hand had struck it at the peak and squashed it down. Dimly, he saw that all the wood, which at one time had made the window frames and doors, was gone. Black streaks dressed the brickwork and radiated across the walls. It reminded him of the damage, the squirming marks, made by Crundall's gun.

He squeezed through the doorway.

There, he risked using a torch Crundall had given him. He wondered what produced its clean, white light, but the light comforted him. By it, he saw that the house was an empty shambles, with twisted metal supports, which had held up the roof, hanging down into the rooms. There was nothing left of furniture or anything else. It was an old house, very old, and Boraston thought he had seen it before on one of his walks near the school. He judged that they were not more than a mile or so away from the school and some ten miles from the coast.

"Boraston, please switch off the torch."

Maria's quietly insistent voice at his elbow brought him back to the reality of the moment as snappily as if she had screamed. His ears detected a swooping, moaning sound

like the rise and fall of an engine close at hand. He switched off the torch

It was utterly dark.

The sound continued. It rose to a higher pitch and became, once again, a voice that sang with just sufficient melody to make it pleasing. "What is that, Maria?"

"Never show a light for more than ten seconds," she replied simply, not answering his question. "As soon as we have rested we must walk on, out of the radiation belt."

"Why?"

"Because Crundall says they live on light. The daylight will free them. If you left the torch on too long they would use the beam to cross the darkness from their hive to us." She said it as if it was a childish liturgy and several of the smaller children repeated it after her.

He stared into the darkness.

"Where are they?"

A dozen small arms extended towards the black landscape he couldn't see—even the arms were only just visible to him. The apparent contradiction suddenly put him on the alert. He couldn't see outside so why could he see their shapes in the darkness of the room?

He discovered why.

Above him was tiny glowing light. It was like a faint electric bulb which filled the room with a feeble glow. It hung from a strut of the ruined roof and it was translucent and oval like a small chicken's egg.

Maria stared up at it.

She sighed with suppressed terror. Her terror was beyond expression in any other way. She had a deep knowledge of what she was staring at and what it could do. "You mustn't use the torch again. The Moon must not come out. It only needs light and power and, if it gets them, it will grow and move about, otherwise, if it's dark for long enough it will die."

Boraston considered it.

"Suppose I dislodge it?"

"Oh no!" All the children whispered to him.

"Well, what then?"

A boy spoke to him, from the shadow at his elbow.



"That one has strayed from the hive. If it gets no light before morning then it will die but it only needs a little to feed on—even the light in your eyes if you were close enough. If it lives, in the morning it will attack us." His statement was a practical declaration of fact.

Boraston said quietly: "It needs light. If one of you got up on my shoulders we could throw a jacket over it. Then it won't have light."

They were very still and silent.

"Which one?" He queried, in his cajoling, authoritative schoolmaster's voice. "Who'll help me?"

Quietly, the boy replied: "I will."

The boy perched on Boraston's shoulder like a light bird on a broad branch. The child had only one arm to hold the coat. His other arm was curled uselessly towards his body, like a blighted leaf.

"All right, do it now."

The coat swung upwards with all the accuracy a small child possessed. It didn't miss. It fell across the metal rafter and over the small, glowing light.

Boraston heard a gentle whining.

The boy crumpled from his shoulders like a tiny sack of feathers. He twisted his body to catch the slim form before it touched the ground. The hand he touched was cold.

"Ah!" The other children stepped away from him and the one on the floor.

"He isn't dead." Boraston reassured them.

"Better dead." Maria whispered in his ear.

"Tell me about that thing." He could hardly hold back the anger in his voice, prevent it from showing. "He's not better dead, understand? He's alive."

They were silent again.

"Maria! Tell me about the light."

"Yes, Boraston." She went quiet as if, hopefully, she could leave it at that, but he caught her arm and squeezed it until she spoke again. "In the deep pools, they live in the deep pools. Many, many, many of them in each pool of light. In the dark they shrink together but as soon as

the sun comes up they break out and if they touch you then you die."

"Are they everywhere?"

"Only in the radiation belts."

"But this boy isn't dead. I felt his heartbeat."

"He will die, soon."

"Then the radiation belts have a life of their own. They depend on light. Presumably the sun enhances the level of radiation during the day, light and radiation are complimentary to the life, like warmth and water. The life in the radiation belts is death to the life outside." He mused his thought aloud. "That's right, isn't it?"

"We shall go away soon." Maria answered.

"Yes."

He bent down and picked up the boy. The thin body was very cold. "He isn't dead." Boraston muttered to himself. "I know he isn't dead."

They went out into the dark again, all of them.

The box in Boraston's hand clicked every hundred yards or so and he became adept at switching their direction whenever it chattered, moving away until it was a slow, steady click again. All the time he recalled the old landmarks and prayed that they hadn't changed. He even wondered how far the epi-centre of an atomic bomb might extend but in his heart he wasn't at all sure it had been a bomb at all. The boy was a heavy lump in his arms and he cursed the unknown enemy as any man might.

It was clear enough when they reached halfway. He saw a hill nearby he had never seen before. It was like a conical beehive but it was glowing and at its centre it was bright, like a diamond held in a globe of glass.

"Not far now," he assured them, "because if that is the centre then we only have the same distance to the other side."

They clung to him all the same. None of them would touch the boy in his arms though.

Under his feet he felt something that was spongy. In the glow from the pile, he could see a green cover reaching as far as the merging darkness that made a tight horizon for his vision. Here and there, a different colour glowed or

sparked like the sharp flash of a crystal. Where the flashes of new colour were brightest he could hear a tinkle as clear as a bell.

It occurred to him that he knew what the bright hive was, or had been. He recalled the site of the great power house which had stood at the place, large and impressive, a delight to Klaus who thought it was destructively peaceful.

A freshening breeze warned him of the coming dawn. They began to hurry along and he counted the heads around him only when they did, eventually, pause for breath.

"Where is the one with the limp?"

Maria pointed behind her.

A child was crawling after them like a small, dark monkey, a few yards away but not much more than a shadow. He went back to her and swept her up into his arms, for some reason keeping her tiny body away from the boy's: each child under an arm. He couldn't manage the box as well. "You carry her, Maria," he ordered.

She took the small girl and held her tightly.

The dawn, the first false light, brightened the horizon. About them the land brightened too and the voice in the land sang louder until Boraston realised it had never been completely silent. He pushed the children onwards to the blacker strip of ground he could just see half a mile ahead.

The singing was as loud as a dynamo. The deep pools were on fire with a new brilliance and were losing their compact shapes.

Soon they had reached the blackened ground.

He stopped and looked back.

His eyes were blinded. They were blinded by the beauty of light. It wreathed about the sky from the low hives and especially from the high hill, like blazing comets or a million black insects smokily reaching up from the trees, but no longer black and touched with fire. The ground they had crossed was bright with green and blue, white and red, colours offending the eye because they were demanding.

"Another of Crundall's consolations?" Boraston asked

himself. He answered his own question: "No, it's mindless. Only colour and instinctive life . . . nothing more."

A gleaming speck dived at him. It was small and hard and glued itself to his arm like a cold, hard needle. He pinched it off and it exploded in an aura of light as if its life blood was nothing but light. He found himself ululating his pleasure in triumph like a primitive animal.

The children jumped back from him.

"They can't hurt us," he shouted at them.

"Not you, Boraston." Maria shook her head. "You are different."

"Different?" He suddenly understood. He understood why, for the first time in his life, he was not afraid. A hero only in his vision, just as a man who trembled at hints and shadows while he was awake could be a God in his dreams—because he knew it was only a dream.

He looked around at the small faces of the children. "I'm sorry."

More bright needles dived at them.

They ran from them.

When they had stopped running he found there were only seven children left. One was in Maria's arms and another in his. Behind them, three still bumps glowed with brightness like quartz rocks. He stared at them, distressed, and then started to run back.

"No, Boraston, you can't help them."

Maria's thin face and black hair was at his side looking up at him with the fullness of strength in its expression. "I thought you would know. It was my fault. Now you feel guilty and there is no reason to feel guilty."

"But they are dead."

She shook her head. "Just changed."

Boraston was shocked. He was shocked by the religious resignation that he had sensed in Crundall's attitude to Roget's death. "You believe in something then?"

She nodded. "Everyone does but you."

For the first time in his life Boraston was tempted to find out why. Something had happened, some sort of proof, and they knew about life and death with an absolute conviction . . . the kind of conviction people had always

wanted ; whether it was right or not. "It didn't happen in my time," he thought, "it must have been after this started."

Three miles on they reached the water. For the last three miles the grass had been green and there was neither screaming colour or dead blackness. The sea was pastel blue, creamed with small waves.

It was a very nearly deserted sea but, about a mile out, a leaden lump broke the surface. Even as Boraston watched it, another smaller lump left its flank and surged across the water towards them.

He waited with patience and very little hope. This had to be what Crundall had asked him to seek out but, somehow, he knew he had found an empty cup to offer the children the old man had put in his charge . . .

Or a cup of bitterness.

### THREE

"Move along the shore!"

Boraston scowled at the grotesque figure clambering over the small craft. The figure was helmeted and wore a padded suit. He had to waddle over the humped deck and he looked ugly and uncouth. Nothing could be seen of his face because it was completely enclosed by a mask.

"Move along yourself!" Boraston yelled back.

The megaphone voice boomed at them again.

"Move along the shore to the cliffs. We will wait for you there." The broad and stunted, inhuman shape on the boat stood very still, rising and falling with the rise and fall of the deck under its feet.

"Why can't we stay here?"

"Radiation." The megaphone called. The word echoed across the water as if it was a good answer to all argument.

"What will happen when we get to the cliffs?" Boraston was suspicious. It wasn't the first time someone had invited him to walk into a trap and he had always hated to be tricked.

He stared out at the man. It seemed he had the advan-

tage. Either they did as they were told otherwise they would never know what advantage they had missed.

"All right, we will go."

The climb up the hill behind the cliff was slow and painful. The sea sparkled, blue and white right out to the distant horizon; the waves were like glazed terracotta, apparently still and hard.

None of the children had seen the sea before nor had they ever climbed so high. They were silent and watchful but happy all the same. Boraston could feel their happiness. For the first time in his life he appreciated someone else's joy and the danger, he knew lay out to sea, made it all the more valuable. Inland, he could see the dark blur of distant trees and the greyness of the town they had left but between the country was on fire. He dragged his eyes away.

Over the crest of the hill was another town.

It was ruined in part. Tall blocks, which once had been flats and hotels, had been sheered off as if by an overwhelming force. Below the line of destruction there were smaller buildings intact.

He could see the submarine too. It was at the end of the long finger of the pier which still pointed out to sea for the best part of half a mile. It was a smart pier and had formed part of a smart marina. "That was hardly an improvement." He thought resentfully, remembering the evenings he had fished from the old wooden pier of his own day. The smell of the fish seemed to come fresh to his nose and he could hear the old voices talking and calling. He heard the man calling the delights of the five-shilling trip down the coast by boat and the cry of a hawker selling his wares from the stall by the front. He could hear a million voices and most of them were children he had never heard before.

They straggled down into the town.

It was deserted.

Tides had smashed the concrete promenade. They had risen daily in their fury and smashed the houses along the promenade as well, sweeping up the streets until their strength was spent. Dead seaweed draped about the walls

the sea had broken, like dirty curtains left out to dry. The roadways were covered with a mess of mud and shingle.

The group of suited men stood at the end of the pier. Their suits were all padded and they looked like identical monsters from some unlikely planet. Their faces were just discernible behind the opaque glass of the masks hung over their heads.

"No further!"

The voice at close range was too loud to be natural.

Boraston couldn't guess which one had spoken. He instinctively looked for the man at the centre where he expected all leaders to stand.

"Where are you from?"

Boraston and the children were silent for a while. It was as if they expected more—with acute anticipation. There was nothing friendly about the men but Boraston knew they were curious.

"I have brought these children from Crundall's sector. He said I should get them to the outside, away from all this."

They were suddenly alert.

He could sense the tension passing from one man to another like a sparking current. The man at the very centre of the group stepped forward.

"How did you get out?"

Boraston replied simply: "We walked."

"Through the radiation belt?"

He nodded.

One thickly padded arm rose and fell again. A long pole was extended over their heads with a small instrument dangling from it. The pole was withdrawn and the men stared down at the small instrument.

"What's the verdict?" Boraston knew they were coming to a decision, according to some book or other, which told them to make their decisions according to the book.

"Did Crundall give you a message?"

Boraston shook his head. "He asked me to bring these children out. I think he had some idea that you sent me." He paused, watching the dim features for a reaction, hoping

for compassion. He could see nothing but the blur of nose or mouth and the faint light of an eye. "What are you going to do?"

The hard voice wasn't quite so loud and strident, "I know of Crundall. He was one of our men. We dropped him after the disaster to take care of the town. It was a suicide mission but he accepted that." The voice trailed away then spoke again. "His task was to make the survivors stay where they were, to make sure none of them broke loose."

"He changed his mind." Boraston smiled at them grimly. He knew perfectly well what the man was trying to say and he wasn't afraid for himself. He was afraid for the children. If his visions made sense this was it: he was to protect the children. There was no doubt that the men had a duty and would do it. They weren't a rescue mission. Their task was to stop where they were, watching and waiting, for any survivors with one thing in mind.

Survivors were a blot to be cleaned up.

That had been Crundall's job too. He had to be subtle. He spread the story that the radiation belts were invulnerable and possibly he kept the little wars between the sectors going. There was little doubt in Boraston's mind that in other towns there were other Crundalls who saw that the wretched remnants of the disaster killed each other off.

Yet, Crundall had been beaten by the children.

Boraston decided to try persuasion. "Crundall thought these children were worth saving. He is one of your men. Don't you think his judgment was good? After all, he is on the spot and the land shouldn't be too lightly discarded. I'm sure that your political bosses would care for the extra territory. I think Crundall wanted you to know it was possible now."

"We have more clean land than we need."

Boraston almost said: "I bet you have, you bastard. You just don't want it overcrowded with refugees that's all." Instead he went on in the same patient way. "You have a religion haven't you? Doesn't that make it easier to take these children with you?"

"No."



"Why?"

"Because we know that death isn't the end for them."

Boraston stared at the ugly figure. "Damned convenient religion. Seems I heard the padre say something of the sort just before a gook shot me in the backside in Korea. If I had been on my knees instead of my stomach I wouldn't have been here now."

The men stood very still.

Boraston reflected that they had a religion which was the nut without the kernel. They had the fact and had discarded the dogma and the morality. He saw their stillness and wondered if they were with him.

"Korea?"

He saw his mistake. "Just a joke," he said tamely, "a kind of parable. What I want is the children's safety."

"Our orders are to kill."

"Why?"

The man hesitated. Boraston could sense his indecision. Not a doubt, as to whether he should kill, but a doubt as to what he was killing. "There is a house in the town. Go there and wait while we refer the matter to higher authority."

"Suppose I'm not prepared to wait?"

"What do you mean?"

Boraston smiled at him. "I could kill you and every one of your men before you could reach the submarine. I could throw you into the sea one by one. Does that change things?"

"Against these weapons." The man raised his hand and revealed a small rod he had palmed there. "You couldn't even move."

Maria said in her soft voice: "He was stung by a Diabol but he is still alive. I saw it sting him." She pointed up at the boy still in his arms. "He carried him for miles and he isn't contaminated. You can see the boy was stung. He is as cold as ice."

Her face was alight with some kind of inspiration which hadn't been there before. Boraston had seen the same look in the face of a woman with her first baby.

"You can't kill him."

The man lifted his helmet very slowly. He lifted it clear of his shoulders and Boraston saw a mild, middle-aged face and hair that was short cropped and grey. The jaw was set firm and the keen, blue eyes were direct.

Boraston recognised the hero type.

The man stared at him for a long moment.

Quietly, he lowered his helmet again. He had made his gesture and had obviously taken a terrible risk which would earn him an accolade or the firing squad, depending on what the book said.

"I'm certain now. You must go to the house I told you about. I would prefer you went alone but if you like you can take the children with you. It's the big house with the cross on the door, at the end of that street. We will contact you again tomorrow." He turned and waddled away like a fat duck back along the pier. The others went with him.

"The captain's a great guy," Boraston remarked irreverently, to no one in particular.

They found the house easily.

It was very ordinary. The kind of house a well-to-do citizen might call home and hearth—very middle class. The walls were mostly glass and the roof was flat and it could have been a confectionery box.

On the door there was a cross.

Boraston found that the door moved beneath his hand as if it was well oiled. The interior was clean and sparsely but tastefully furnished with the usual nice stuff a middle class family thought right. It had been very well preserved. If anyone had died there they had cleaned up after them.

Carefully, he searched each room and, finding a bed in one of them, he laid the boy down. He made himself feel for the boy's pulse but there was no pulse to find. He closed the door of the room behind him.

It was in the last room he looked at, a half basement, that there was something altogether different. Not for the first time he wished he had Klaus's knowledge of science and its logical mumbo jumbo. Everywhere, there was equipment, solid and glossy, with wires, both gold and silver, radiating out like a spider's web. The web had some

kind of crazy pattern that was familiar to him. He felt he had seen it before.

Maria, his eternal shadow, was at his elbow and she whispered to him: "Over there, I can see writing on the wall." She was excited. "Look, look what it says!"

He looked.

The writing was a wide scrawl in white paint. It said:  
**BORASTON TRY AGAIN.**

He continued to look. There were no words to express his feelings. He had no intuition which made sense of what he had read.

"Did you write that, Maria?"

She understood but she wasn't resentful. "I'm the only one who can write among the children but I didn't do that."

He smiled at her. "I don't suppose you could spell my name. Forgive my suspicion. I'm afraid I never change."

"What does the writing mean, Boraston?"

"I don't know. If it means anything the answer is somewhere in this room."

"Can I help you?"

"You go back to the others and try to find them some food. I'll call you if there is something new."

"Yes." She skipped away like a child, a very small child.

He began to search.

There was a desperation about his search. He felt he was living on borrowed time. Sooner or later the men would be back and he could guess what they would do. His desperation awoke a feeling of familiarity. There was something about the room he recognised.

He saw the cage in the middle of the machinery. It was big enough for a man and it was made of copper-like material; a golden bird cage floating free from the floor.

"I know you!"

Boraston ran his hand about its intricate web. He found the connecting wires which ran from the banks of electronic gear to the bottom of the cage. "Yes, I know you, prison. Remember me—Boraston?" He allowed his hands to wander again and he discovered the door in the cage. It swung open and he stepped into the cage.

The girl ran in. "I found some food, Boraston, I . . ."  
She stopped and her face puckered up, "not so soon. Don't leave us so soon."

He jumped out of the cage and ran to her.

"Never, Maria. I never leave small children. Don't you know that?" He picked her up and swung her around. "Whatever they do we stick together."

She shook her head.

"That's not right, Boraston. You must find out the truth about yourself. If you do then you will help us too. Crundall knew that. I know it."

"How?"

"I don't think I can explain. You are a strong man but you are short of a sense. That's how we know lots of things—with our sixth sense. I can't explain sight to the blind so how can I explain what I know to you?"

He turned away from her, puzzled, and saw the cabinet.

The book was there in the cabinet. He knew it at once. He turned its paper-thin, metal pages and read a story he knew already, deep inside his mind. Every line was familiar. It was his own case history.

Last time he had failed. What guarantee was there of success this time?

"I must try again," he said to himself, "but not until the morning. Tonight is for my children."

The men came back at dawn. They surrounded the house and Boraston watched them curiously.

The cold, hard voice hailed them. "Send the children out. The decision has been made."

"Get stuffed!"

He slammed the window shut.

The voice went on inexorably: "You have twenty-four hours to do your duty. At the end of that time the children will be eliminated as a public nuisance."

"Let them stay here."

"No."

"Then, my friend, you can get knotted." Boraston knew what he had to do.

"Maria!"

She appeared in the doorway. Her face was white and

its paleness made it look thinner. He wondered what she would look like if she was fed and contented, and he thought she would look like the girl in the vision . . . perhaps.

"Bring the rest of the children in here. They will stay here while I eliminate the gentlemen specialists in elimination. If I take too long then you are to leave by the back way."

"No, Boraston. You must try the other way."

He stared at her. "Do you think it would work?"

"We all believe it will, all the children."

"Mr. Faraday's cage," he mused, "if it still works and this switch is still the electrical supply and the ionisation is sufficient then perhaps I could do it."

He took a small syringe from the cabinet and charged it. For a moment he looked at Maria questioningly. She nodded and he jabbed it into his arm. It was done . . . as easily as that. There were a few minutes left.

He opened the window and looked down on the men. "Listen, Captain, whatever you are, I'll be back. If you have harmed these kids I'll kill you and your men. Then, I'll work my way across your nice clean land and kill a few more. Do you understand?"

Maria had the current switched on. He could hear the machinery humming busily. He climbed into the cage and his legs were like lead. The drug was taking effect.

His vision was sharpened. Colours became meaningful. Movement was fluid.

The children were grouped about the cage watching him silently. Maria had inclined her head like a small puppy that wanted to cry because its heart was touched. He could hear a man shouting.

"Come down now. Otherwise we will cut the current."

Boraston's voice was slurred. "Don't, Maria."

She shook her head and gathered the children around her like a small flock, puzzled but trusting. "Goodbye, Boraston."

"No!"

"Listen to the girl!" the voice called from outside.

"Harm them and I'll obliterate you!"

"Boraston," she said to him in her soft voice. "If you succeed then it will be all right. I know it."

The web was spinning about, forming an intricate pattern like letters. The web shrank and it was a complex monogram, the monogram he knew so well. Each letter was writhing and it drew his eye as an entity, as he tried to trace its separate parts. There was nothing he could do.

Nothing he could do for Maria.

The classroom was exactly as he had left it. His body felt stiff and cold but one quick glance at the clock confirmed that barely a second had passed since he had left. He remembered what he had written in the book—his own case history. He recalled their theory.

Ballentine, the exact, little scientist, had said: "We will send you back into the life stream. We will send you far enough back to correct the mistake which caused the disaster, before the whole world is consumed. We know where it started. You will be there to stop it."

But they had been so wrong.

He had gone back to the womb of a woman years before the crucial time. His orders were lost in the sheer effort of life. They haunted him as they tried to adjust his position in time. Time after time they attempted to bring him forward but it didn't work. He was too deeply rooted in his new life and his mission was no longer conscious.

He was a man of his time.

He had forgotten what he was supposed to be.

In the end all they could do was leave him a message on a wall and a machine set for his return. In addition they left a few educated guesses in the book Boraston had found in the cabinet.

One of their guesses meant something to him.

Ballentine had written: "A man called Klaus may have been the assassin of President Calper. There is new historical evidence and, somehow, somewhere, the computers worked out that you would come across him. If Calper had lived he would have held the balance."

Boraston knew it was correct.

"This time you're right, Ballentine. There is only one

thing to do and I had better do it quickly." He stood up and walked to the door wondering if Klaus was in his laboratory. He wasn't.

He was coming along the corridor. He stood with his back to the wall, where Roget was to stand, as soon as he saw Boraston.

"I wanted to see you." His lisp made his voice sound depraved. "You were the only one I could turn to." The face was long and sad and there was a disturbance in his eyes, a distant gleam of heartbreak.

Boraston watched him closely, angry at his own hesitation. One blow would break the thin neck. What mattered a man like him, with his wispy hair and ferrety face? "What is it?"

"I'm in trouble."

"How?"

"Miss Lamb told the police about my bombs."

Boraston returned his smile recalling the nasty mess he seemed. He asked: "Can't you tell the police the bombs were a joke? They are a joke aren't they?"

The scraggy face became a thing of hurt dignity.

"Joke! Those bombs are for hate, Boraston. I will use them one day without compunction. The world made clean. My kind given their rightful place in society. My name remembered."

"In that case, my dear friend, you had better remove the bombs to a safer place . . . hadn't you?"

Klaus smiled at him. Relief stamped its mark, up and down the skinny lines of his features.

"I'll do it now."

Boraston returned his smile recalling the nasty mess he had found under the floor of the laboratory when he was with Crundall. It had been a big explosion and there was only one explanation.

Suddenly he ran after Klaus.

He wasn't worried about Klaus but he was worried about others, even Miss Lamb and Miss Shaw. Most of them would be in the dining room but one or two might be walking about.

There was only one. It was Yates.

He swept the boy into his arms and ran for the open field outside. He was barely in the open when the huge, gusting explosion rocked the building behind him.

The boy looked at him with startled eyes.

"It was only a boiler," Boraston consoled him.

Yates shook his head. "No, Sir. It was Klaus's bloody bombs and you know it."

Boraston said: "You puzzle me, Yates."

The boy smiled. "Well, you ain't so dusty, Sir. I thought you hated my guts."

He put the boy down. "I do, but it doesn't prevent me from helping you."

"I thought it would."

"Now, you know better, don't you?"

The child seemed to have made a genuine discovery. There was a look in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

"Go back and help clear up the mess, Yates."

"Yes, Sir. You coming, Sir?"

"Later."

The boy ran away to the school, excited.

For a long time Boraston stood waiting, but at last it came. The swift passage of seasons, each in order, heat and cold, but the final season warm and comforting. He seemed to drift across the field and into the little wood, along the road to the country. Finally, he settled as a broken leaf might settle in the early autumn.

The girl was looking into his face.

"Wake up, Boraston!"

He stared at her black hair and pale face.

"What is it, Maria?"

"I thought for one terrible moment that you were dead. Your body was so stiff and cold." Her dark eyes were gleaming with tears. "I was reading Yates's stuff on brotherly love. I had forgotten all about you. For mush like that!" She threw her arms around him. "I love you, Boraston. If you died I would . . ."

He smiled at her.

"Don't mock Yates. You never know what his books achieved with the simple minded and they are the people that count."



"That's cynical." She poked him playfully with her long finger. "Though, I must admit, he is a damned bore."

Boraston examined his watch.

"Come on, Maria. Time's up."

She jumped up quickly and took his arm, clucking urgently at the idea of paying for extra time. She picked her way around the other couples with delicate grace all the same, as if they had money to burn and a minute here or there didn't matter.

They came to the toll gate and the blazing lights of the crowded city beyond. She whispered to Boraston: "What we need is a little less brotherly love and a bit more room to move. Half an hour or so of privacy a week isn't enough, is it?"

"How?"

"Well," she confided, "but for Yates and his brotherly love they might have had a disaster or so and that would have weeded out the competition, wouldn't it . . . ?" The words froze on her lips. For the first time since she had met her husband she didn't like the look on his face.

Even Boraston didn't know why he was angry.

It was just that somehow he felt he had made a mistake, a terrible oversight which he couldn't put his finger on. The feeling haunted him all the way home.

— R. W. MACKELWORTH

# impulse

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